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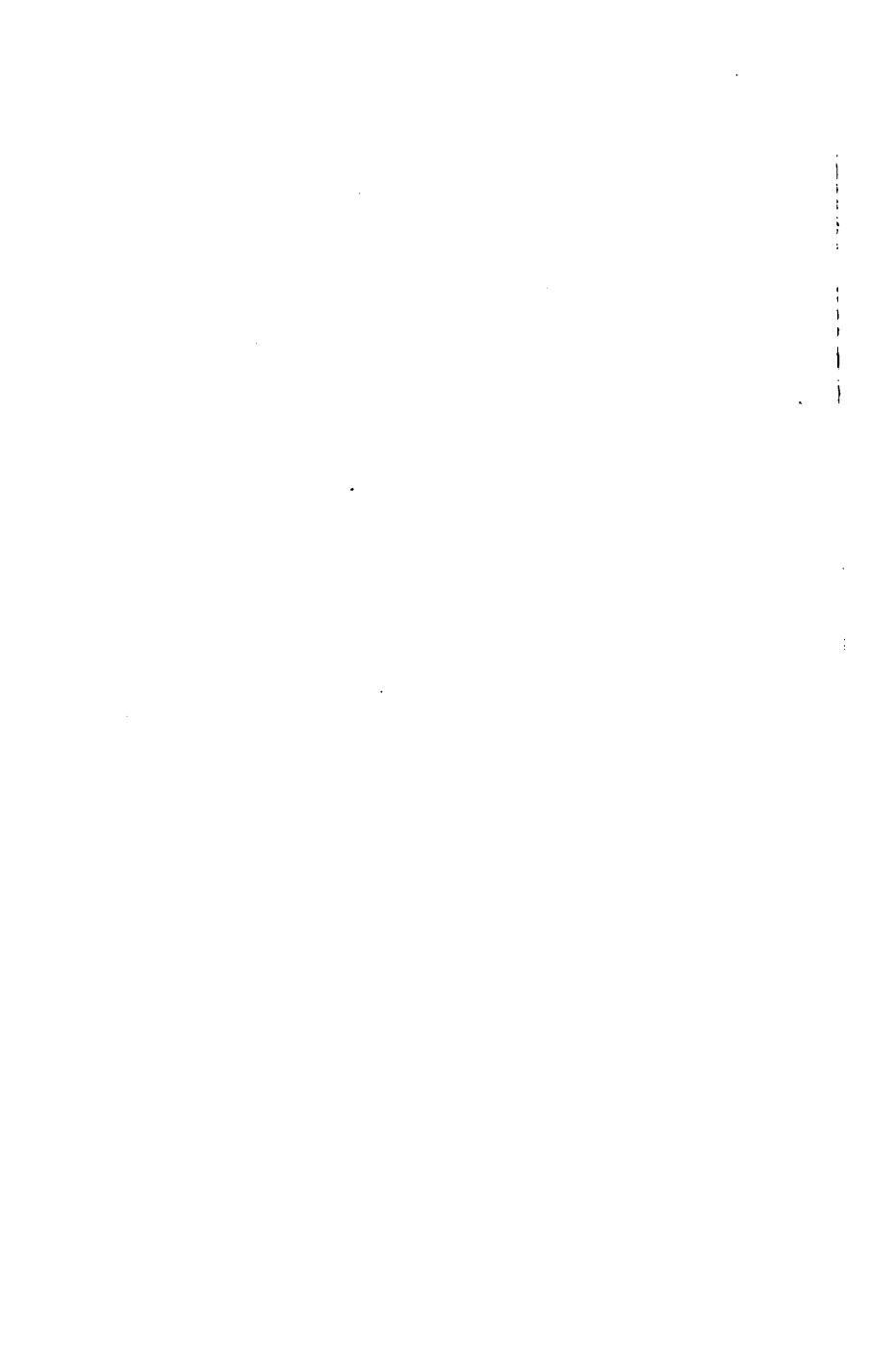
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Findlater, M.



A BLIND BIRD'S NEST

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

OVER THE HILLS

BETTY MUSGRAVE

A NARROW WAY

THE ROSE OF JOY

WITH JANE HELEN FINDLATER

TALES THAT ARE TOLD

WITH JANE HELEN FINDLATER

KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN

AND ALAN MACAULAY

THE AFFAIR AT THE INN



THE LINE OF POLES FOR THE SALMON NETS

A BLIND BIRD'S NEST

BY
MARY FINDLATER

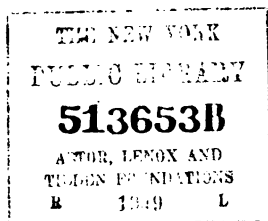
AUTHOR OF
"THE ROSE OF JOY," ETC.

"GOD BUILDS THE NEST OF THE BLIND BIRD."

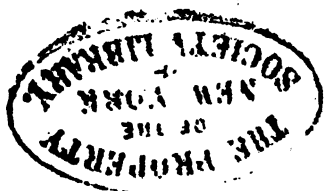
Old Proverb.

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS

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*The Illustrations are from Photographs taken by
Mr. C. R. Rowe, of Saltash*

A BLIND BIRD'S NEST

CHAPTER I

'TWAS as if a field of summer flowers had taken on human shape and begun to dance ; and the music swayed them like a merry wind.

The great schoolroom, as empty as a barn, was lit from above by lamps that hung amidst clumsy wreaths of green, so that the light fell down on the dancing children, in their bright dresses, with their long, floating hair.

The simple music, the twinkling feet, the unshadowed rosy faces of the little dancers, and the candid colouring of their frocks, gave a fairylike look to the whole scene, combining in a harmony of gaiety that the amusements of older people can never show.

Groups, composed of parents, guardians, and governesses, had collected about the doorways to look on, whilst a few of the younger women joined in the dances, exchanging laughing comments above the heads of their little partners, as they spun up and down the room. But the spectators were in a dull world of their own : the real fun was with the children.

Fond mothers made whispered remarks to one another, each meanwhile keeping an anxious eye fixed upon her own little girl. The younger women chattered amongst themselves, and the two or three elderly men, who by some means had been betrayed into coming, tried

hard to stifle their yawns and look genial, as they wondered how much longer the thing would go on.

"*See the wolf in the sheepfold!*" whispered the French governess to one of the other teachers.

She indicated a man who had entered quietly, and now stood amongst the others in the doorway. Silent as his entrance had been, it created something of a sensation. The hostess came up at once to shake hands with him, and several other people greeted him with pleased surprise.

"Wolf! Fiddlesticks! He's not even a black sheep, except for his curly black hair!" retorted the English girl, who was young and fresh-faced. "Don't you know who it is? It's Captain Mark Bassett, little Nellie Bassett's father. He's come with his sister Mrs. Ashton, I suppose—there she is, talking to him now."

The wolf, meanwhile, stood in the doorway, in an attitude that was not favourable to the looks of the stout elderly men beside him. From time to time he made a remark to his sister, a dark woman, who was talking to their hostess.

"Nellie looks very happy," he said, as his little daughter, a rosy, honest-looking child, came dancing up to them, along with a partner somewhat older than herself—a round-faced girl, with a self-conscious simper on her button mouth.

"Aren't you going to dance with *any* of us, father?" said Nellie. "This is Maria Briggs—won't you dance with her?"

The invitation, thus plainly conveyed, could scarcely be disregarded, so Mark led out the conscious little Miss Briggs, who all the time was thinking of something grown up enough to say; she only at the last moment resolved upon a remark about the weather.

("It's no use trying to force conversation, my mother always says," she explained to her companions afterwards. "The great thing is to be *perfectly natural*, so I just simply said it had been a fine day, and he said 'Very.'")

His duty done, Mark returned to his place in the doorway, and Miss Briggs, glad but proud, relapsed upon a partner of her own age and sex.

"Maria Courteney Briggs is the only one of us (excepting me, of course) who would care to dance with father—he's *so old*, you know," Nellie explained to her aunt; "but Maria will boast about it for a week." She ran off to join the other children, for the music had struck up afresh.

Captain Bassett turned to a stout woman, who had just been talking to his sister. "Is your daughter here, Mrs. Woods?" he inquired.

"Elma? Yes, indeed," she answered, in a high voice, with a pronounced American accent. "There she is, with the white tie in her hair."

The girl she spoke of came stepping down the room, her head crowned with a white bow that looked like a gigantic butterfly. She nodded condescendingly to her mother as she passed them—a composed little person, very sure-footed, and well pleased with herself. Captain Bassett watched the children forming for another dance, his own little girl, red-cheeked and smiling; another, with auburn hair hanging far below her waist, dancing riotously with a tall slip of a girl in a grey gown, whose flushed face was the colour of a rose.

He counted them mechanically—a pink frock, a blue frock, two white ones, and a green; a tiny fat boy, being carried around by an energetic little girl in spectacles; another boy, much bigger, clasping a baby girl in red shoes, who had just begun to cry; two little ones stopping to pant, and to re-tie the ribbons in their hair; a governess dancing with a solemn mite, who counted every step.

He leant against the wall watching the little dancers pass and repass in shining, flower-like bands. One after another they drifted on, cheeks scarlet, lips smiling, like pretty images in a dream, and as he looked he sighed.

"*Youth is beauty, youth is genius, youth is everything!*" he thought, a sudden passion of regret rising at his heart: his own boyhood; his lost innocence; the chances of life that would never return. . . . He would have sold, he thought, willingly, his forty and odd years, for one hour of that unsullied gaiety, for the chance of beginning all over again. Then for a moment the whole thing mixed and reeled before his eyes, and he saw nothing, until he pulled himself up to reply to some remark of his sister's, and the faces became distinct to him once more.

Girls, of course, were in the majority, but he began to notice a tall boy, who seemed to be dancing energetically with every one by turns (the other boys in the room were mere children).

The grown-up young women smiled upon him with evident delight, the little children clung to him and would hardly let him go when the dances stopped. Somehow he had not the air of an Englishman, and yet he did not look like a foreigner. He was very thin still, but made on a large scale, with broad shoulders and a small head, which he carried very prettily. His eyes were as bright as the eyes of a lizard, his lips shut very tight. The colourless face had a curious, characteristic fulness at the corners of the tucked-in mouth, which gave strength to the whole expression, and his manner had more assurance than is usual with boys of that age. As he conducted each of his partners, even the most babyish, to a seat, he stood and bowed before her, with a kind of bright composure.

"Who is the little cavalier?" asked Captain Bassett, turning to the stout Mrs. Woods. "They seem to work him pretty hard, but he looks as if he liked it."

Before Mrs. Woods had time to reply, a tall woman who had been standing in silence beside them said, "That's *my* boy!"

The voice had a silvery quality, also a quiver of pride in it, which the speaker tried to repress.

"Ah, he's an American then!" said Mark; and Mrs.

Woods introduced him to her sister-in-law, who (she explained) had just arrived from America, along with her boy.

"Captain Bassett is a near neighbour of ours, Margaret," she said to the tall woman. "You will see him often."

Margaret Woods turned with an illuminating smile. "Terence didn't want to come here at all to-night," she said; "but now I don't know how I shall ever get him away. I must—oh! I *must* dance with some of those babies myself! I cannot stand and look on any longer."

With a soft swoop, and a swish of her voluminous draperies, she caught up a fat thing about five years old, that was standing forlorn with its thumb in its mouth, and floated away down the room, returning in a few minutes, laughing, and panting a little, two other small creatures following, as if bewitched, in her wake.

She was a very tall woman, richly and beautifully dressed—or at least appeared so, in contrast to the other women in the room, none of whom wore anything remarkable.

"You're just a *perfect* child, Aunt Margaret," said Elma Woods, who was then stepping past them. She uttered the remark in a high, detached voice, with a flutter of her huge white bow as she nodded her head.

"Young America!" thought Mark Bassett. He looked amused when Terence Woods came up to stand beside his mother.

The likeness between them was very apparent as they stood that way, side by side.

Although there were lines of sadness and humour in the woman's face, which were still absent from that of the boy, there was in both the same eager vitality, the same alert intelligence and strength of character.

Every now and then, as he stood beside her, the boy took hold of one of his mother's hands—it hung down half-hidden by the folds of her dress; he would give it

a quick little squeeze, as quickly returned, looking up in her face as if to say, "We understand each other without any words!"

It was a happy picture, and again, as he looked at them, Mark Bassett sighed, remembering he had never looked into his mother's eyes like that.

"Who's that dreadful child?" he suddenly inquired of his sister, who had been talking about the children with the American lady. "She looks as if she had seen the Gorgon's Head!"

Mrs. Ashton put up her eyeglass. "That girl who is dancing with Nellie, you mean?" She turned to him, sinking her voice so that the other woman could not hear. "Oh, Mark, that's Agnes Sorel—poor Austin Sorel's child, you know!"

The girl they spoke of passed them slowly, as if unaware of their existence. She was older than most of the others, tall, and extremely flat and thin in figure, like a specimen pressed between the leaves of a book; her long, thin feet were in heel-less satin slippers, that looked strangely awkward, tied about the ankles with crossed ribbons; her dress of white muslin was worn with a black sash; her black hair was tied at the back of her neck with a black bow; her stick-like arms hung straight by her sides; her face was white and fixed, and her great black eyes seemed to see nothing as she joylessly rotated amongst the other children.

"*That* Austin Sorel's girl!" exclaimed Mark. "Yes, of course; now I look at her, I can see she's like her mother. Poor child! Do you suppose she knows?"

"Can you look at her and doubt it?" said Mrs. Ashton. "Nellie and she are great friends, and Nellie told me that 'there was something sad at home,' though of course she did not know what it was; but the girl is dreadfully sensitive, she says."

"Take me up to her, Jenny, I want to speak to her," he said.

Mrs. Ashton turned to their hostess. "My brother would like to speak to Agnes Sorel," she said. "He used to know her people."

"I knew her father," said Captain Bassett, distinctly.

"Oh," said the lady, a little surprised.

Mark followed her across the room, to a corner where the girl was now standing by herself. She seemed blind and deaf to all about her.

"This is Captain Bassett, Agnes," said her schoolmistress.

"How do you do?" he said kindly. "You're Agnes Sorel, I hear. I saw you dancing with Nellie—I'm Nellie's father. I used to know your mother long ago."

As he looked down at her, a sudden pity quivered in his face, softening the hard lines of it for a moment.

Agnes did not speak; then, seeing her schoolmistress watching her, she gave him in silence her left hand.

"Oh, Agnes, your left hand!" said the lady reproachfully. "We thought you had forgotten that bad habit!"

Captain Bassett laughed; the hand was thin and small, and felt in his as soft as a mouse.

"Now, give me the other one, and that will make up for it!" he said.

She slowly and timidly gave him the right hand instead, and she looked up at him once with her black eyes.

"I'm very fond of Nellie," she said; then relapsed into shy silence.

"See!" said he. "Here is the little American coming up to you. I was going to ask you to dance with me, but I've nearly broken my back dancing with Nellie; she only comes up to my elbow. Do you know him?"

"He's Elma Woods' cousin, I think," said Agnes.

Meanwhile, when Captain Bassett had crossed the room to speak to the girl, Mrs. Woods and her son had also been talking about her.

"Don't you think that you would like to go and ask

that pale little girl over there to dance with you, Terence?" she said.

"I *don't* think so, mother," he answered. "I was introduced to her before, and she said 'Yes' twice, when I spoke to her, and wouldn't utter another word; but I will go if you like, though I'd rather try to speak to a chair!"

"Yes, do go now; she looks so sad and pale. Then take her to have supper, and bring her near me, and see that she gets something *very* nice to eat. I'm dying to see what she would be like after a good laugh and some ice cream, aren't you? She looks as if she had seen a ghost!"

"Very well, I'll give her the dance, and the ice cream, if I can, mother; but I don't believe the angel Gabriel could make her laugh!"

He smiled at his mother, and went off to the corner where the girl stood, to ask for his dance with the utmost grace and assurance.

Agnes consented gladly, for it was terrible to stand beside Captain Bassett, without a word to say.

"You are Elma Woods' cousin, aren't you?" she asked, as they took their places on the floor. Her face had cleared as she looked at Terence.

"Yes; we've come over, my mother and I, because I've been ill. Great luck, too, for I got well again as soon as we left America! That's my mother over there, talking to Elma's mother. Mine's the tall one in the pink gown. Is yours here?"

"My mother is dead," said the girl slowly.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! But I couldn't know—I scarcely even heard your name when we were introduced," he answered, eager to make apology.

"My name is Agnes Sorel."

The cloud had fallen on her white face again.

"Sorel? *Sorell*—is that it? Rhymes with 'bell'? Oh, I say! I've got that name on a card. I make a collection of tombs—postcards, I mean. It's quite unique—they're not at all common. Do you collect? Mother and I got

this one at Loches—fourteenth-century tomb of Agnes Sorel. She's lying on her back, with her hands crossed in front of her, and her feet pressed against two lambs, all curled over with tight little stone curls. It's ugly, but it's just quite right. I'll send it to you—I've got two of them. Where do you live? You're at school here, are you not?"

"Will you send it here, please. I'm not going home for Christmas," said the girl.

"That's hard, isn't it? Do you live far away?"

"No; my home is at Ponde, only about twelve miles from here. My grandmother, whom I live with, is away from home just now."

"Do you hate it?" he asked.

"Hate staying at school? No, not at all. I love it; I shall be sorry when I leave—I'm going away at the end of next term."

"Well, I'll send you the card right enough. I've two of them, so I can afford to give one away! Isn't that commercial? Just what you in England think we are all like; but I must keep the best for my collection. Do you know any tombs about here? We found any number in France, my mother and I."

"Why do you choose tombs?" Agnes asked. Her face brightened again as he talked on.

"Why? Oh, because we've got so few in America—old ones, I mean; not a single knight."

"Of course not!" she laughed.

He flushed quickly. "Well, you needn't laugh; we can't help our own dates. It's not the sword and shield that make the knight, anyway!"

But his little fit of temper was over in a moment, and he ran on to tell her about his home in Washington—his school, his illness that had brought him a long holiday, his travels with his mother, his future at West Point, and so on. Life appeared to be a sort of high carnival all the time.

"I'll soon be nineteen," he explained; adding quickly, "I was eighteen my last birthday."

"I am just seventeen. I shouldn't have thought that you were so much older," said the girl. "How much older are you?"

"I—I—my birthday was last week," he said desperately.

Agnes did not even smile, but in a moment he burst out laughing himself, and laughed so heartily that she had to join.

"Who were you talking to, when I came up?" he asked. They were now quite at ease with one another. "The man who is standing 'glowering'—isn't that a good word? I heard it from a Scotchman on the way over—in the doorway?"

"That's Captain Bassett, Nellie Bassett's father."

"I've read about a 'Bassett Hound,' I think. I say, isn't he like a knight?" said Terence admiringly, as they stopped dancing and stood together looking across the room.

The remark showed some insight, for, the man "glowering" in the doorway had certainly an appearance suggestive of a bolder, brighter time.

Beauty of person has its date, like other things; and every now and then one comes across a face that does not match to-day. Sometimes, now very rarely, one sees a woman with the "rounded cheek," the sloping shoulders, and the large, bovine eye, so much admired in the beginning of last century. But Mark Bassett's face belonged to an earlier date: he ought to have worn armour, or clothes richer in colour and texture than the time allowed; the furrows on his brow might have showed as the bold eyes were strained to follow the flight of a hawk in the sunshine.

"Doesn't he just cry out for a helmet?" said the boy. "He's beautiful, I think. I only wish I had him on a tomb!"

"You will find some very like him on the tombs at Little Widger, if you go there," said the girl. "That is quite

near where your aunt is living—I know, because my uncle is the rector.”

“ Oh, do you stay there ? ” he asked.

“ Yes, sometimes.”

“ I will see you then, for we are going to Little Widger, mother and I, for a long time. When do you go home ? ”

“ Oh, not till July ; school breaks up then.”

“ Come and talk to my mother,” he said. “ She’s gone in to supper with the Black Knight.”

Agnes laughed, and he led her away to the supper-room, and sought out a corner for her at his mother’s side.

The girl’s face was faintly flushed, and her eyes lighted up ; she looked positively pretty as she came walking through the room.

Mrs. Woods at once turned to speak to her. Then Agnes spent an enchanted quarter of an hour, too much excited by this wonderful lady’s presence to know or care what she was eating—overcome by a sudden sense of motherhood, of sweetness, of candour that she had never approached to before.

Like some pitiful fledgeling pressing close to a mother bird, she squeezed her lean little person near to the voluminous folds of the adorable lady’s dress ; her eyes answered the bright, kind eyes that looked into them ; she strained her ears to hear every tone of the silver voice.

Were there many Americans like this, she wondered ? Could this be a relation of Elma’s mother, who was so square and high-voiced, so full of explanations about everything, always with such a jingling of metals about her fat person ? This Mrs. Woods seemed to understand her at a glance ; she could speak to her without choking on her words, as she used to do when a blind paroxysm of shyness overcame her.

“ Miss Sorel knows about lots of tombs ; mother,” said Terence, who had left them to go and eat with

considerable voracity. He came up with another plate of salad in his hand as he spoke. "The old gentleman who is rector at Little Widger is her uncle."

"He's my granduncle, my mother's uncle," said Agnes.

"And your parents? Do they live here?" asked Mrs. Woods.

"My mother is dead," said the girl. She looked down as she spoke, and her voice trembled. Mrs. Woods asked no more questions. She only said they were sure to meet at Little Widger, and bade Agnes good-night, with a smile that seemed to the girl to touch her very heart.

"Good-bye! Mind you look up some tombs for me," said Terence gaily. "I'll send you the card—it's my second best, but I think you'll like it," and they were gone.

"Oh, Elma!" said Agnes to Elma Woods, who had sauntered up to her. "Oh, Elma, isn't she lovely?"

"Aunt Margaret?" said Elma. "Yes, rather; she's just a *perfect* child, and Terence is badly spoilt. He and my brothers just fight like cats and dogs all day long!"

Mrs. Ashton and her brother were going away, too. She stopped and spoke very kindly, and Captain Bassett asked Agnes to tell her grandmother that he was coming to see her, the next time he passed through Ponde.

"Perhaps she won't remember me," he said. "I have not seen her for so many years, but I will come and see if she knows me still."

Agnes could not think of anything to say. She shook hands with him in silence, and stood with downcast eyes, not daring to look up again.

"By Heaven! Jenny, she's the saddest thing I ever saw!" said Mark Bassett, as he followed his sister out of the room. "She's going to be pretty, too, some day. Her mother had dark eyes, too—but how different! Fancy that being poor Austin's child! She looks as if she could weep *black* tears!"

CHAPTER II

ON a hot morning in July at the close of the Summer Term, the school broke up for the holidays. The house that day was like an ant-heap stirred—every one ran about in all directions at the same moment.

All morning there were boxes in the hall, boxes being carried downstairs, children dancing with joy, children weeping, children kissing and being kissed, governesses and servants flying on different errands, cabs grinding in quick succession on the gravel in front of the house.

By three o'clock in the afternoon most of the girls had gone; but Agnes Sorel, Nellie Bassett, and Elma Woods had to take a later train. Little Nellie came up to kiss Agnes, and asked her if it was true that she really was not coming back next term.

"Yes, I'm not coming back," Agnes answered in a low voice, turning away her head.

Nellie looked mystified.

"I'm going to put up my hair these holidays," remarked Miss Briggs, who stood near a mirror in the hall, giving a touch to her hat from time to time. (Miss Briggs was a day pupil, and was less excited than the others in consequence.) She went on, "And mother means me not to 'come out' exactly, but just to *be there* on her 'at home' days, to help with the entertaining; but of course," she continued, looking at Agnes, "there's no society at Ponde, I suppose?"

"No, there is nobody at all, we never go anywhere," said Agnes.

"Why not?" asked Nellie.

Agnes turned away, as if she had not heard the question.

Miss Briggs exchanged a glance with Elma. "It's something about her father," she said in a low voice when Agnes had moved away. "I don't quite know *what* it is, but something."

"I believe he's absconded," said Elma. "They're always doing that, and then in a year or two they begin again."

"Perhaps in America, not here," said Maria Briggs loftily. She had a kindly heart, and added, "I hope it's nothing as bad as that."

"*Tisn't*," said Nellie decidedly; "father knows him, and he wouldn't know an absconder, if that's what you call him. I heard him say he knew him at Christmas-time when he was at our dance, and he called him 'Poor fellow!' and he said he was going down to Ponde to see Mrs. Sorel, Agnes' grandmother."

"My Aunt Margaret was quite taken up with her," said Elma, "and she said she was like the little mermaid, and the Snow Maiden in Hans Andersen's tales."

"Agnes is very nice, I'm sure!" said Miss Briggs, squeezing her hand into a tight glove as she spoke; "and whoever her relations are, I like her, but she has got no style."

"Ah ha! Ho ho!" laughed Nellie, who, young as she was, had a sense of the absurd.

Agnes came up to them just then to bid them good-bye, for her cab was at the door. She spoke huskily, and her face was very pale. "Good-bye, girls, I'm just going"; then she turned to the young governess, "Good-bye, Miss Brown."

"Good-bye, Agnes—see you again in September," she said, and kissed her kindly.

"No, Miss Brown, I'm not coming back. I'm just going to stay with my grandmother."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Well, good-bye, dear."

Agnes said good-bye to her and the schoolmistress;

then, without a smile, not trusting herself to look back again at her companions, she went slowly across the hall, through the white pillared porch that was set round with pots full of scarlet flowers, out into the sunshine. She entered the carriage and it rolled away. They had a last glimpse of her white face, with the deep, unchildlike woe stamped upon it, as she looked farewell to the cheerful little world of school.

"Poor child ! poor child !" said the schoolmistress.

Miss Brown glanced up with tears in her eyes. "My old nurse used to tell me," she said, "that *God builds the nest of the blind bird*—Agnes is a '*blind bird*' if ever there was one !" She turned to speed another parting, and said no more.

"Did you hear *that* ?" said Miss Briggs darkly to Elma Woods. "A *blind bird*, that's what Miss Brown called her."

"Perhaps her father's blind, poor man !" said Nellie.

"No, you little goose ! *Blind bird* meant herself ; it's a mystery."

"Ask your father about it when you get home, Nellie," said Elma.

"Oh, no ! I *couldn't*," said Nellie.

"Well," said Elma, drawling her words as usual, "I'm perfectly certain that my father would answer any question on earth that I liked to ask him—as far as he could ; but they often can't."

"Well, mine wouldn't ; he's not an American !" retorted Nellie.

The bickering ceased as their names were called out, and the carriage that was to take them both to the station came grinding up to the door.

When Agnes found herself alone in a railway carriage, she sat for some time choking back her tears. "It's better to be going home for good," she thought ; "if they all knew they would never speak to me again."

She drew out a little pocket-book in order to put some money into it and then her face suddenly brightened, for she took out a postcard, which she had there amongst some letters.

It was only the grey print of a tomb, representing the figure of a young woman, dressed in a tight bodice and full round skirt, lying out very straight, with her hands folded palm to palm upon her bosom. The head lay back slightly in an attitude of infinite rest. On either side a small angel, nearly covered by its drooping wings, was kneeling to support her arms. Her feet were pressed against two young lambs that had stiff, twisted horns, and were all covered over with tight little curls deeply carved in the stone. The name of "Agnes Sorel" was cut along the edge of the slab. It was not beautiful—simple, almost grotesque; yet there was a frankness and a quietude about it impressive even to the ignorance of a child. So they used to think of the Rest of Death, long ago. Something about the connection with her own name attracted the girl's imagination. She pondered over the thing, and wondered why it was all so pleasing, when the figure was quite ugly. Then she would look up to gaze out of the window at the green, flower-besprinkled fields, the brightest part of "merry England" through which the train was passing, but there was none of the cheerfulness of a young girl's home-coming about her pale face. Her "mourning eyes" had a fear lurking in them, her lips the line of an unchildlike grief. She looked down again at the card in her hand, and the shadow on her face lifted a little. In firm, boyish handwriting there was written on the edge, "Good-bye, au revoir.—Terence Woods."

Presently the train drew up at a small country station, where Agnes was the only passenger to alight. A rusty fly was waiting just outside the station house. She nodded to the driver and he lifted up her box, then she got into the carriage and sat in silence as they drove away.

Once the man turned round with a smile to remark,
"It's 'olidays now, miss, ain't it?"

"Yes, Jackson, for some weeks."

"The old lady, she'll be proud to 'ave you back again, miss?" he went on.

She answered, "Yes, Jackson," and spoke no more.

When they had driven for about two miles, and crested a long hill, the road, which now lay through a thick wood, began to descend abruptly to the river. Occasionally between the tall trees came "gleams like the flashing of a shield" from the bright water below. The fly crawled slowly downwards, zigzagging from side to side, cracking and creaking, while the man encouraged the uncertain steps of the old horse. At the steepest part of the hill he got down and walked by the horse's head. Inside the carriage the pale child in her black dress sat unmoved, it seemed, by the sight of the glad green world around her, unrejoiced by the thought of going home.

As it emerged from the wood, the road ceased abruptly, coming to an end in a little ancient pier and landing-stage built of moss-covered stones. Agnes sat down on the low parapet to wait until the ferry-boat came across from the village at the other side of the river. The driver summoned it by pulling a bell that hung from a beam at the pier-head, and in a few minutes the ferryman rowed up in a clumsy boat.

"I'll bring the box with the big boat, miss," said the driver to Agnes.

The girl thanked him and got in by herself.

It was a still evening as they rowed across, so that every sound was audible from the houses on the other side.

A mile below, the mouth of the river widens out to the sea. Even as far as Ponde the great ships at times came steering up; but the wooded heights closed about the bend of the stream so sharply that no glimpse of the sea was visible there.

The village of Ponde lay on the side of the hill. So steep was the single street that it looked like a flight of stairs. Roads wound somewhere about on the heights above the houses; but the whole immediate life of the place was carried on by water. Buried, hidden, ~~secret~~ as it was from the rest of the world by land, the great water-way in front of it was its connection with life. The boats of the Romans had passed up there. Countless generations had come and gone, leaving no marks behind them; the small, low-browed houses on the quay were only the successors of others still more ancient, that had watched the broad highway with the eyes of their little windows for hundreds of years.

It looked like a place to hide in, there to forget and to be forgotten. That evening the tide was full, so that the water came up to the very feet of the green oak-trees that dipped their branches into it, and the reflections were carried half-way across the stream.

The sun was going down behind the hill; already the houses by the quay were in shadow, and the line of poles for the salmon-nets showed white to the left as the boat came softly in to shore. No one had come to meet her; Agnes got out of the boat, paid the man, and turned, a lonely little figure, to walk up the precipitous street by herself.

The other girls, her companions, who reached their homes that evening, would be met by excited brothers and sisters, or delighted parents; but she had not expected any welcome. She even shrank back a little when the innkeeper's wife, who stood in the doorway, called out a greeting to her as she passed. A red-faced girl in a pink gown was giggling at the bar, serving a fisherman with a draught of ale from a bright pewter pot; the noise of their chaff and laughter followed Agnes as she went by the open door. What jolly life and gaiety there was in there!

She thought of the description that Nellie Bassett had

given of what *her* arrival would be : her father would be at the station to meet her, Aunt Jenny standing at the house door, and there would be no end of fun !

Then of the American girl's high, excited description of all that she anticipated at her home-coming. "My mother," Elma said "will just be perfectly *wild* with delight at getting me back"; and she described the sweets that she would get, the "lovely times" she would have—how she would ride out with her brothers and her cousin Terence on her new pony, and all the rest of it.

"I don't mind about any of those things," said Agnes to herself. "But only just if I had a mother like that lovely one belonging to that boy, and if I could talk about my relations like other people."

She stepped into the deep shadow that lay on one side of the road, and walked slowly; for, although it was near sunset, the heat was still very great. Two people could almost have shaken hands across the narrow roadway. On either side stood low houses, each set in a tiny garden, at that season dense with flowers—the whole air smelt of them; flowers were everywhere, in every cranny, almost between the stones.

Even in that broad sunshine the village wore an air of concealment; it was set amongst orchards, which filled the hollow of the hill and surrounded every cottage, and wherever you looked the prospect was closed by orchard trees.

The flagged pathways, no wider than a ribbon, which wound about between the houses, ended always in an orchard gate. The trees were like trees in the pictures that illustrate a fairy tale—low-growing, green and close, with knotted branches and twisted stems. The light beneath the furtive boughs was only a shimmer, pierced here and there by a golden spear of sun. Buttercups grew thick amidst the lush grass, and more flowers ran over the edges of the old walls. The tiny houses, so low, and so garlanded with blossom, looked like the dwellings of elves rather than of human beings; you caught glimpses of

doors open within doors, of strange nooks and little courtyards. Miniature causeways, flagged with irregular slabs of stone, ran beside the low-browed houses and disappeared round acute and unexpected corners.

Even at that hour the heat on a summer's night was almost tropic ; no breath of wind, it seemed—of the wind that galloped from the wide world across the high moors that lay above the river—could find its way into those close-embowered lanes.

But in the evening the smell of salt water came up with the rising tide, driving with a smack of life and fresh desire through the woods and across the ferry, from the open sea.

As Agnes reached the head of the lane, a breath of fresher air came floating up from below ; the noises from the river grew sharper ; she could hear the sound of oars and the cries from a boat where marines were training. When she turned to look back she saw for an instant the row of straining figures, the flickering dip of the oars, and heard the sharp words of discipline shouted out by the officer in command—the flash of vigour and man's endeavour gave a moment's life to the silent lane.

She held up her head and walked more briskly, as if the words of command had been addressed to her.

CHAPTER III

HALF-WAY up the hill, a little apart from the elfish cottages, she came to an old yellow-washed house standing in a small garden. It was not a large house, yet, in contrast to the diminutive dwellings around it, looked comparatively big. Deep eaves darkened its little flat windows; the low doorway was set in a coping of stone; a huge wistaria which had crept all along the wall, hung its masses of purple blossom above the door; and clematis and myrtle grew up the whole front of the house; the little garden was full of flowers.

A stranger given to story-telling, who passed that way, might have imagined it the dwelling of some little old maiden lady (there are such in every village), devoted to flowers, pious and charitable, with her minute existence parcelled out between gardening, church services, crochet, and illusory recollections of her youth.

Agnes walked up the flagged pathway and entered a narrow, dark-panelled hall. She stood at the foot of the staircase, and called "Betty! Betty! are you there?"

A thin, elderly maid-servant, in spectacles, came peering out into the hall. When she saw the girl she smiled, and wiping her hand on her apron, laid it on her shoulder.

"You're late, Miss Agnes, dear; Mrs. Sorel's been lookin' for you this half-hour and more."

"I know, Betty; the train was late. Is Mrs. Sorel upstairs?"

"Yes, Miss Agnes." The woman approached her, lowering

her voice. "Your aunt, Miss Clare, is come home—she came home on Friday, miss."

"Oh," said Agnes; their eyes met for a moment. "Oh," she said again, and then went upstairs and opened the door of a sitting-room to the right.

It was a small room with two windows, both looking to the garden. The last rays of sunset came glaring hotly in, striking full on the figure of a large old woman in a black dress who was standing near the window, leaning on a cane.

As the girl came in she took a heavy, hobbling step forward, held out her big hand to her, and gave her a short, dry kiss. "You're very late, child; I expected you an hour ago. Did Jackson meet you all right? You've grown a good deal, I think; let me look at you."

She looked into the great black eyes under the delicate level brows, then turned quickly away from the girl, muttering something to herself, and hobbled to an armchair. Agnes came and sat down beside her. The old woman was largely built, still massive in figure, with broad shoulders and big, strong hands—a woman once full of force and pride of life; still, even in old age, very much alive.

With the wash of red light from the window striking on it, her colourless face looked as if it had been pinched out of clay by a very cunning artist—so deep were the eye-sockets, so strong was the clamped mouth.

"You're not going back to school then, Nancy?" she began, looking at the girl.

"No, grannie, I couldn't; oh, I couldn't *now*." Agnes laid her hands on the back of the chair, and swallowed hard to keep down her tears.

"Very well, very well," said the old woman. "Perhaps it's better so. You must do what you can to go on with some education at home. Your Aunt Clare will be at home all winter."

"Oh, Aunt Clare? She won't help me, you know."

"Yes; I know she won't, but she's here. She will be here all winter now. What's that you are holding in your hand, child—that little picture?"

"It's a postcard, grannie," said the girl, her face suddenly brightening. "I wanted to show it to you. I got it because it had my own name upon it—see, *Tomb of Agnes Sorel*—isn't it odd? I got it from a nice American boy; he is a cousin of Elma Woods, you know. I've often told you about her—her mother has taken a house near Little Widger. Elma is at our school, and he came with his mother to the school dance at Christmas. He sent me that afterwards. He was so nice."

"Yes, I have seen nice Americans," said Mrs. Sorel. "They are sometimes very pleasant." Her tone was that of one surveying some very small object from a great height.

"Did you enjoy the dance, Nancy?"

"Yes, some of it. I liked him, and his mother was lovely. Oh, grannie! you never saw anything so beautiful as her dress!"

"Oh, they always wear very fine clothes," said Mrs. Sorel again, speaking in the same tone.

"But it wasn't only her clothes; she—she—she was so soft, so kind, grannie, and she spoke so beautifully!"

"They do not generally do *that*," said Mrs. Sorel.

Agnes hugged her remembrance in silence for a moment; then she added, "And Nellie Bassett's father was there too—for a little—Captain Bassett."

"Ah, Mark Bassett?" Mrs. Sorel's tone changed instantly. She sat up and rubbed her hand across her eyes. "I haven't seen him for many years. Did he speak to you, Agnes?"

"He was quite kind," said the girl slowly. "He told me that he had known my mother." She gave a quick glance upward, speaking the last words in a low voice.

"He was your father's friend," said Mrs. Sorel. Her mouth gave a painful twitch as she spoke, and her large

hand closed on the head of her cane. "They were at college together. Austin and he were great friends."

"He asked me about you, grannie, and he said he would come and see you the next time he came over from Little Widger."

"Oh, let him come; he's nothing new to say to me," said the old woman, leaning back her head and closing her eyes as if smitten with sudden weariness. "He was a handsome young fellow when I saw him last. I remember him dancing with your mother. He used to be a great favourite with women everywhere—still is, I daresay."

"Nellie thinks him nicer than a fat father—so many of them are fat," said Agnes; and her grandmother laughed and patted her hand, telling her to go away and get ready for dinner.

"Where is Aunt Clare?" asked Agnes.

"She went to help Mrs. Ingraham about the school feast," said Mrs. Sorel. "She will come in soon, I expect."

The door was open, and as she spoke they heard voices echoing up from the front door. A woman was laughing—fit after fit of shallow, giggling laughter.

"There she is," said Agnes, and looked at her grandmother. "Mr. Ingraham has just gone; I see him at the gate."

In another minute a young woman came slowly into the room. She was laughing no longer, but looked about her as if by no means well pleased.

"Why, Nancy, is this you!" she exclaimed, giving Agnes a hasty, indifferent kiss; "you are just the same white-faced, peaked-looking thing that you used to be, in spite of the superior school that was supposed to do so much for you. Get out of that chair, and give it to me, for I am just dead with fatigue."

She threw herself into the chair from which Nancy had just risen, drew forward another low one, stretched her feet upon that, and yawned. There was an abandoned sloth about her movements, yet she was a woman who

in her early youth must have been both graceful and supple, before she became too stout. Now her smooth face was a little too fat. Her dress had no collar, but a string of amber beads encircled her thick white throat; her reddish hair was arranged very low. She wore a black dress with some rather gaudy orange trimmings. She seemed to be only a body, as she sat and yawned and rolled her head back on the chair.

"Open the window, do, Nancy, the heat is killing," she said.

"The windows are all open," said Agnes.

"Well, it's stifling, anyhow; what a suffocating little hole this place is always! I should die if I lived here for any length of time," she said, yawning. "Mr. Ingraham came back with me. I daresay his wife didn't like it. I never saw anything like that Mrs. Ingraham; she's such a vulgar little beast. I can't bear to be associated with her in any way. She suggested that I should carry up those heavy baskets of china to the schoolroom tomorrow!"

"It's a school-feast, isn't it?" said Agnes.

"Oh, Sunday-school rot of some kind or other; Mr. Ingraham is never happy unless he's doing something of that sort. Those country clergyman are all alike!" She yawned again, and stretched herself till the chair cracked beneath her. "I'm sure they might have been delighted to have had me help them at all. I made two beautiful garlands, and I wrote a dozen names, at least, in the prizes; but she is so taken up with that ridiculous brother of hers that she never notices any one else. Hand me a cushion, Agnes; these chairs are so uncomfortable. Why is dinner so late?"

"Betty is busy," said her mother, looking at her oddly, "starching."

"She might have finished it by this time, I'm sure," said Clare. "Just two muslin bodices that I'd have done far better myself, if I hadn't been so tired and so hot."

This sort of life with two maidservants and nothing ever comfortable is not worth living! Go downstairs, Agnes, like a good girl, and finish the ironing if Betty isn't done; it's quite simple, hardly a scrap of lace or anything. I'm too hot to move."

She began to fan herself with a newspaper, and Agnes left the room.

She went down to the kitchen, which smelt of starch and hot-ironed linen; there the old maid was bending over the table, ironing and muttering to herself. "Oh, it's you, miss. Can you hold the end of this for me, if you please, till I get it pulled straight?" she said to Agnes.

"Miss Clare's been here since last week, hasn't she, Betty?" said the girl.

"Yes, miss, and just the same as ever—the same as ever; there's no convincin' her that we 'aven't ten thousand a year. I 'aven't 'ad the time to do a thing but look after her furbelows since she came to the house. Your grandmother never was like that, Miss Agnes, and the fine lady she was in 'er youth, when I came to 'er first! Never an 'and's turn, miss, would she let a maid do for her that she could do for 'erself; many's the time Mrs. Parker (her as was your grandmother's maid, miss, before you remember) would say to me that she'd have to stand by doin' nothing while her mistress dressed; 'For unless you give 'er dresses that fasten up the back,' she'd say, 'she'll 'ave them on before you can stir a finger.' 'And that's the proper thing for a soldier's wife, Parker, to be able to 'elp 'erself,' Mrs. Sorel would say; and the General—that's your grandfather, miss—would laugh and tell 'er that she was quite right; not but what he took a deal of waiting on himself—most gentlemen is that way, miss. Mr. Austin——" She stopped and felt the heat of the iron on the palm of her hand.

"Give me the iron, Betty; I think I can do that," said Agnes; and she began to iron out a sleeve, whilst Betty *busied* herself about the stove,

Clare's voice sounded peevishly from the doorway a minute afterwards. "Is dinner not ready yet, Betty? Would you just go round to the schoolroom directly afterwards—I'm too tired to go myself—and fetch my gloves, and a book that I left there by mistake this afternoon. Agnes, you'll scorch your face with those hot irons—there's nothing so bad for the skin; the heat in here is frightful!"

She turned and trailed away, leaving the door wide open.

CHAPTER IV

THE next week Clare went off to town for a few days—to the “summer sales,” she said.

Agnes was out of doors all day, and happy enough by herself, for she had got lists of books from her schoolmistress and worked her way through them, reading for hours in a corner by the river, where she could sit for a whole afternoon hearing nothing but the noises from the shipping, or the whistle of a bird.

Mrs. Sorel went out very little; her lameness prevented her walking, and she paid no visits. With the exception of the rector's wife, there were only working people in the village. Mrs. Sorel had long ago cut all connection with the world. Agnes knew that two of her school companions, Elma Woods and Nellie Bassett, lived near Little Widger. She sometimes went to stay with her mother's old relatives, who lived at the parsonage there, and she looked forward to seeing the girls then, but she would never have thought of asking them to come to see her at Ponde.

Once, she remembered, when she came home for the holidays, having asked her grandmother's permission to invite one of her schoolfellows down to spend the day. The refusal was so decided that she had never asked such a thing again.

Clare always protested against Agnes being sent to an expensive school, calling it a “great waste of money.”

“It is her mother's money, not mine, so *we* could have no benefit from it, Clare,” Mrs. Sorel had answered in her biting way.

Clare was silent for a minute, then began : " If Agnes has to be a governess, the less she knows the better—it's just casting pearls before swine for a cultivated woman to live in such a miserable position. Of what use were all my accomplishments to me ? or my family, or anything ? They engaged me because I could swim ! "

" Distinguished family, accomplishments, and character, can surely not be a disadvantage to any woman's future. I shall be thankful if Agnes has the last of the three," said Mrs. Sorel, and Clare got up and flounced out of the room. Mother and daughter, there was a strange, deep antipathy between them that made their relations impossible.

One evening after Clare had gone, Agnes sat alone with her grandmother.

The old woman had laid down her book and leant back in her chair with closed eyes. She did not belong to the gentle race of old ladies—knitters—who are always clicking away with knitting-needles, fashioning fluffy children's jackets or shawls. When her eyesight failed, or she was tired of reading, she sat still and did nothing. It was then that the girl used to look at her with a heart too full to speak ; she longed to give her some comfort, yet feared, if she said anything, that it would only make " the old wound bleed anew."

As Agnes sat looking across at her grandmother, she remembered another evening—a winter evening long ago, when she had been quite a child.

When they are very young, children take all the circumstances of life for granted ; then, gradually, as they begin to grow up, each question goes farther than the last. Agnes, in her lonely childhood, had questioned very little ; but, as she grew older, the shadow on her home seemed to deepen, and she began to question, to wonder, to listen to scraps of conversation between her grandmother and some of her friends, to piece together chance words that the servants let fall. Once she heard some one ask Mrs. Sorel why she had settled at Ponde. " It is a quiet place,

utterly out of the world—that is one reason ; but I have another one, too,” she had answered, and the visitor asked her no more.

Agnes wondered what the other reason could be, and how it was that her grandmother, who was so lame, and who never went out in general, occasionally went off for the whole day—a day at times of wild weather ; where she went ; and why, when she came back, she was paler and grimmer than usual.

The servants said something once about “ *him* ”—“ *he* ” was ill ; then, seeing the child listening intently, Betty hurried to change the subject, but that evening, after Mrs. Sorel had returned, Agnes crept up to the fireside where she was sitting. The old woman sat back in her chair with her hands stretched out along the arms, and her eyes fixed upon the fire. When the child took a footstool and sat at her knee, she neither moved nor spoke. At length Agnes looked up into her face with a sort of trembling curiosity, that longed for and yet shrank from an explanation ; and in a very small voice, hearing all the time the scurrying of her own frightened heart, she asked the question that had been haunting her for so long.

She began by beating about the bush. “ Am I like my mother, grannie ? ” she asked.

“ Yes, Nancy, your eyes are like hers.”

“ Was my father like you, grannie ? ”

“ No,” said Mrs. Sorel slowly. “ He was not like me ; he was like your grandfather—you remember your grandfather, don’t you, Nancy ? ” (She was trying to change the subject.)

“ Yes, grannie, a little.” A pause, and then, “ Did my father die too, when I was a little baby, as mother did ? ” the child asked. A cold terror descended upon her at the same moment. She sat with bent head pretending to stroke the cat with her little trembling hand, hardly able to breathe because her heart was beating so hard.

Her grandmother answered slowly, "Your father is not dead, Agnes."

"Oh, grannie! where is he then?" asked the little girl.

She turned a white face upon the old woman, and clung to her knee. After a long silence Mrs. Sorel laid one hand on Nancy's shoulder, and spoke in a hoarse voice, as if she forced the words out with difficulty: "Your father is in prison, child, in the convict prison; you had better not speak to me any more about it, for I cannot bear it."

"Oh, grannie, was he very wicked?"

"He killed a man, Agnes—in a moment of passion. There have been people more wicked than that!" Mrs. Sorel's lips twisted into a queer smile that frightened the child as she spoke.

That night in her little bed Agnes awoke—an agony of fear was upon her; the darkness about her seemed thick and whispering.

She had always been a nervous child, but from that time the uncomprehended shadow that hung above her melancholy home took a definite shape to itself, and haunted her, waking and sleeping; it made the coming of night a horror, and blackened the morning sun.

Weeks of this unspoken terror culminated in a long illness. Clare was at home for a time then, but Agnes hardly saw her—a sick-room was not much in her line; so Betty and Mrs. Sorel did all the nursing between them, and when the child got better Mrs. Sorel sent her to school for the first time.

In the busy, wholesome life, amongst companions of her own age, she gradually grew stronger in mind and body. But the haunting horror in the background never left her. Some chance speech of one of her school-fellows in a fit of childish malice had made the girl think her history was known to them all, and in an agony of consciousness she entreated Mrs. Sorel to let her leave school altogether at the end of the term.

Every tiny circumstance connected with the night

when she first heard the truth about her father was stamped on Agnes' mind. She could still remember the very flicker that the fire had made in the grate, and again hear the sound of her own heart beating as she asked her question.

Now, on a summer evening, after so many years had passed, she sat there in the twilight thinking about it all. Presently she got up very softly, so as not to disturb her grandmother, and sat down by the window to write a letter to her beloved Miss Brown.

"I'm not asleep, child. Did you want anything?" said Mrs. Sorel, as Agnes moved past her chair.

"Do you remember what day of the month this is, grannie? The calendar is just beside you," said the girl.

Mrs. Sorel looked at her strangely. "Do I remember? Yes, Agnes, this is the 7th of August—I want no calendar." She paused, and added in a low voice, "This was your father's birthday."

Agnes put aside her writing things and knelt down beside her chair. She had lit a candle on the writing-table, for it was beginning to get dark. The light touched her white brow, and her most innocent mouth; the dark hair, rather untidy, ruffled about her head.

She pressed her cheek against the withered hand that lay out on the arm of the chair. "How old were you when my father was born, grannie?" she asked softly.

"I was only nineteen, Agnes." Mrs. Sorel paused a moment and then went on, "Do you remember what Job said: *'Let that day be darkness . . . as for that night let darkness seize upon it: let it not be joined unto the days of the year, let it not come into the number of the months . . . let them curse it that curse the day . . . let the stars of the twilight thereof be dark . . . because it shut not the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from my eyes.'*" Her voice rolled out the words as if she tasted the bitterness of each one; Agnes trembled at her knee. "You did not know that I could quote the Bible, did you, child?" she said a

ite after. "I have never spoken to you about re-
n, Nancy. Perhaps I was wrong, but it never helped
so how could I? I had my ideas about it when I was
ng, of course—most girls have; but they soon blew
y when real life came. It soothes some people, I
eve, like a fan on a hot day. But of what use were
yers to me? My prayers beat against a stone wall."

Oh, grannie, grannie! Don't be sorry that *I* was
n!" said Agnes, clinging to her knee, and pressing her
against the old woman's arm. "I am here to love
, and you'd rather have me than if I had never been?"

Yes, Nancy; yes, child; you are all I have." She paused
then said, "You must be a better woman than I have
n, Nancy, and pray God you may be a happier one.
was a foolish, headstrong girl, and I made a foolish
riage, and I've paid for it all to the uttermost farthing;

life is like the Jew in the story, and when you've paid
you've got, will have your very flesh and blood."

he stooped down and caught the girl to her heart for a
ment, and held her passionately. Agnes could hear

hard sobs in her throat, but she did not speak, nor
wer the girl's soft kisses by any of her own; she kept
face turned aside.

"Go to bed, Nancy," she said at last, withdrawing her
l. "Go to bed and sleep, and bless you, child!"

CHAPTER V

CLARE came home the next week, bringing with her boxes of unsuitable, sun-faded finery from the summer sales, and complaining that she had no money to pay her bills.

Soon after her return Mrs. Sorel arranged that Agnes should go away to spend some time with her mother's relatives—old people who lived at Little Widger, a village on the edge of the moor, some seven or eight miles from Ponde. Mr. Lascelles, her mother's uncle, had been rector there for uncounted years. He and his wife were fond of the girl, but they held the very name of Sorel in abhorrence, and all relations between the families had to be conducted in the most guarded manner.

Agnes had been at school all winter without coming home, so had missed her usual visit to them that year.

Clare called Mr. Lascelles "a mouldy old thing whose sterilised voice makes the Bible sound like a grammar." They made no comments upon Clare, but they covered her name with a silence that meant more than any criticism, and Agnes always felt she must mention her aunt as seldom as possible at Little Widger.

The day before Agnes left home, a bright August afternoon when the village was full of flowers and hot with the sun, she was in her own room, packing, when she heard a man's footstep coming up the little flagged pathway to the front door. With the bodice she had been folding still in her hand, she went to the open window to see who it was, for a visitor was unknown in that house.

She saw a tall man who was walking bareheaded, looking about him as if he did not know whether he were on the right path. When he came up to the door of the house, he stood still for a minute waiting till his knock had been answered, and Agnes, from her tiny window between the wreaths of purple clematis, caught a glimpse of his upturned face, lean and brown, dented as it were by life; his crisp dark hair and marauder's eyes. She recognised it in an instant. "It's Nellie's father," she thought; "he's come to see grannie, after all." She listened till she heard Betty admit the visitor, then went on with her packing, never thinking of going downstairs.

Captain Bassett came into the little room, where Mrs. Sorel rose to receive him. "Why, Mark Bassett, I've not seen you for nearly twenty years!" she exclaimed, holding his hand as he stood before her. "You're a young man still, and it seems a hundred years since then!"

"No longer *young*," he corrected her. "But it does seem a very lifetime since those days, Mrs. Sorel."

He sat down opposite to her, and his face quivered with a moment's embarrassment, for he noticed how much she was affected by the sight of him. She sat silent, her face very pale, her hands clenched on the arm of her chair. Twice she tried to speak, and could not get to the end of her sentence.

Then she just sat in silence, and Mark Bassett looked on the ground.

"Poor Austin!" he said at last, gently. Mrs. Sorel gave a gasping sigh. "Poor fellow! How is he? You see him sometimes?"

"I have seen him," she said.

"Is he well? Does he seem changed?"

"It's living death; I wish he were in his grave," said she.

"But, Mrs. Sorel, the sentence must come to an end soon; he will get off part of it."

"And what of that! What will become of him then,

Mark? I'm an old woman,—I can't do anything for him; and think of what it all means, that talk of beginning again to a broken man like him, after all these years!" Her voice failed again.

"Ah, well, he must go abroad—start where no one knows——" He stopped, for the old woman gave a harsh laugh and changed the subject.

"Yes, yes, I know all that! But how are you, Mark? You live at Owlscott now, I hear—and you have a nice little girl; my granddaughter was very fond of her at school."

"Yes, Nellie's a jolly little thing—I think, of course—always very happy and never ill. By the way, I saw Agnes at school some months ago. Did she tell you? She's very like her mother."

"The same eyes—with a different expression," said Mrs. Sorel.

Just then Clare came into the room. She paused on the threshold, looking at Captain Bassett with a half-defiant stare before she advanced to greet him.

"You remember Mark Bassett, Clare?" said her mother. "Austin's friend, you know," she added in a lower voice.

"Ah, time has changed *you* very little; I should have known you anywhere," said Mark.

There was something in his tone that a quicker woman might have resented, but Clare looked highly pleased.

She sat down, and began to chatter away to him with many smiles and conscious glances. Her eyebrows, which were very distinct, and of a perfect half-moon shape, sometimes gave her plump face a curiously silly expression. She laughed a good deal, and flourished her pretty white hands in the foreign fashion. Captain Bassett was much to her liking, apparently.

"May I not see Agnes before I go, Mrs. Sorel?" he asked presently. "Nellie will be much disappointed if I can say nothing about her when I get home."

"Oh, yes, certainly you shall see her. Clare, go and tell Agnes to come downstairs. She was in her own room, I think."

Clare rang the bell, and told Betty to summon Agnes.

The girl was sitting by the window when Betty came in. She was reading a book that Miss Brown had given her. Only at that age, I think, can we read with a secondary interest, not because we are interested in the book itself but because some one whom we admire admires it. Agnes was thus reading *The Religio Medici* when Betty summoned her.

"I was to tell you that Captain Bassett, miss, was downstairs."

"Yes, it's all right, Betty. Is Miss Clare there?"

"Yes, miss, she's in the drawing-room."

"All right," said Agnes again, and went on reading.

She had forgotten all about the message when her aunt came into the room. She flounced in as usual; her eyes were angry, the round eyebrows raised, and a spot of red on one cheek. "Didn't Betty tell you you were wanted downstairs?" she began, snatching the book from the girl's hand. "Come down at once. How can you be so provoking? Captain Bassett has been here for half an hour!"

"Well, he did not come to see me," said Agnes, getting up and smoothing her hair.

"No, certainly not! but mother wants you to come downstairs. Absurd! Awkward, half-grown girls should be left in the schoolroom! Come down in a minute or two!"

She swept out of the room as hurriedly as she had entered, leaving the door wide open as usual. Agnes, who was accustomed to her flights, and seldom inquired below the surface, followed her after a few moments.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Agnes came into the room Mark Bassett was sitting with his back to the light, close by the window, his hands clasping one knee. Clare sat opposite, playing with her necklace of amber beads, her head thrown back against her chair so that the light fell on her excited face.

The man's eyes were fixed on the door as Agnes entered. She came in timidly, for she was unused to meeting strangers. So extremely simple was her white gown, with its straight skirt and black sash, that but for the length of the skirt it might have been the dress of a mere child. Still, the half-year that had passed since he had seen her before had forwarded her growth. The open-air life she led had mellowed the pallor of her skin; the angles of her bones were less obtrusive; and although her hands were as thin as claws, and her face had the unawakened expression of a grave child's, there was about face and figure a faint suggestion, the hint of possible scent and colour in a still closely folded bud.

"Well, do you remember me?" he asked, rising and holding out his hand to her, when some touch of memory, or momentary confusion, made Agnes place her left hand in his. When she saw her mistake she tried to draw it away, and gave him the other hand, so that for a moment he held them both. He laughed, and began to chaff her about her bad habits being still uncorrected.

Clare had been listening impatiently. "Go and draw

down the blind, Agnes," she said. As Mark sprang up to do it she detained him, saying, "No, please let Agnes do it; she knows what I wish." Then she plunged into eager talk with him again, and Agnes, thinking she was not wanted any more, went and sat down by the window looking into the garden. Something in her aunt's excited voice and shallow laughter jarred upon her.

She could not help observing the look of amused contempt on Captain Bassett's face, as he leant back in his seat and looked at Clare, nor the quick change in his manner and expression when he answered some remark of Mrs. Sorel's, and the respect with which he spoke to her.

When he got up to take his leave, Agnes timidly asked him how Nellie was. "Has she come home yet?"

"Oh yes, she came home a fortnight ago, and she is blooming as usual. She's nearly as tall as you are now, I think." He stood looking at her. "Do you remember the young American who came with his mother that night I saw you at school, whom you were all dancing with at such a rate?"

"Oh yes, I remember him quite well," said Agnes. She raised her black eyes to look in his face for a moment.

"They are back in our neighbourhood again. Mrs. Woods, his mother, is a charming woman, but she's got a handful in that boy. He'll break his own neck and her heart along with it, I should say, before he's done."

"Oh," said Agnes, "what does he do?"

"What does he not do, is more of the question! He's a plucky little fellow, though, and will no doubt make plenty of dollars some day."

"I liked him," said Agnes softly.

"So does Nellie; she's never happy unless she's allowed to go to the Woods' now, and that funny little girl with the topknot and the screw in her voice is for ever with her."

"Elma is very sensible," said Agnes; "she's quite like an old person sometimes."

"Quite; she amazes my poor child with her ideas. Won't you let Agnes come over and see us, Mrs. Sorel? *She's* not too old for Nellie."

"I am going to Little Widger to-morrow, to my Uncle Timothy's," said Agnes.

"Ah, of course; I had forgotten old Mr. Lascelles was your relation. Your mother's uncle, wasn't he? He's a connection of mine, too. You'll see your little American there, no doubt. The charming lady, his mother, is quite in love with the old church and the rector. Nellie will be delighted to see you, I'm sure."

He said good-bye, and went away, after reminding Mrs. Sorel that he sometimes had to pass in their direction, if he went by the ferry, and asking her if he might come in again.

Mrs. Sorel looked at him hard for a moment, then answered rather dryly that she would always be glad to see him.

"Agnes," said Clare sharply, when the door had closed behind him, "I never saw a girl of your age with such bad manners! Instead of behaving properly, the moment you had shaken hands with Captain Bassett—and given him your left hand, too, like a baby—you went away and sat in a corner without speaking a word, just as if you were sulky because he took no notice of you. At your age you shouldn't expect any man to do so!"

"I did not expect it; I did not want it, Aunt Clare," said the girl.

"Well, it's a great pity that they haven't at least been able to teach you better manners at that ridiculous school. I always said it was absurd to waste money in sending you there. All that nonsense about high school teaching and certificates, and so on!"

"I'm afraid you will find that everywhere nowadays, Clare," said Mrs. Sorel. She added in a low voice, "It's

only in Russia that people require no certificates, and don't ask too many questions."

Agnes had not heard what her grandmother said; but the tense ring in her voice made her aware that a shaft was hidden somewhere, and from her aunt's face she knew that it had hit the mark. With some indistinct murmur about "not staying on to be insulted," Clare left the room. They could hear her door bang after a few seconds, and presently she sent down a message that she would not come to dinner, as she had a bad headache.

The old woman's grey face looked more than usually stern that evening. Agnes sat sewing beside her, making a beautiful story to herself, in which a nun was succouring a young knight, who lay wounded, with his helmet raised, like the "Happy Warrior" in Watt's picture (it had been one of her admired Miss Brown's admirations, this picture). Oddly enough, he spoke with a slight American accent—the anachronism did not disturb Agnes in the least.

The story was interrupted by Mrs. Sorel saying suddenly, "When is your next birthday, child? I forget."

"The 10th of November, grannie."

"Ah, yes; you'll be eighteen then. I remember. I was married at eighteen."

Agnes laughed. "I won't be married at eighteen, grannie, for certain."

"Well, I don't know. Why not?" She leant forward in her chair and looked at the girl. "Agnes," she began, "you're not a child any longer; you must learn to look at things as they are. You will be very foolish if you do not marry when you can—if you ever can! Do you remember one night when I came back from Portland some years ago?" She looked at Agnes, whose face had blanched as she spoke. "I need not remind you of that, poor child! Nor would I, but I mayn't be long with you. You've no one but your Aunt Clare left when I am gone; you know, I think, what that means." Her voice fell lower.

"Remember, Agnes, if you are left alone, you must not go to her anywhere. What I want you to realise is that I can leave you hardly any money. You have not very much education—in spite of all that Clare says about your expensive school; you have few friends, and no relations who can help you. Your Uncle Timothy and his wife are old people, and have others to leave their money to. You have a name that is better forgotten—God forgive me for carrying it on so long!" she said bitterly, covering her eyes with her hand. "You will find it against you at every turn. The world never forgets these things; there is always some one to whisper about the past. Ask your Aunt Clare how it is even in Russia." Her mouth twitched for a moment. "No, Agnes, unless you marry when you're young, you'll have no life of it. Wait till you are getting old—a sickly old maid, with a shadow over her, no money, no friends, living on tea and cat's meat, very likely buried away in some hole of a place like this, grateful if the parson's wife shakes hands with you, an outcast from every class; for working people are far better off than that. Oh, child, be thankful to marry if you can; an old age like that is worse than death—it's death with consciousness."

"But, grandmother," said Agnes, looking up into her passionate face, "I never thought about getting married. I—who would ever want to marry me?"

"Wait till you are older and see. Only think of what I have said, if any one ever does. If I could see you safe, Agnes," she added, "I'd die better. You have been innocent of it all."

Clare reappeared after dinner with a bundle of letters in her hand, which she told Betty to take at once to the post-office. She threw herself down on the sofa, and began to read a French novel: she kept a supply of them in her own room, and would sometimes give one to Agnes, telling her "there was nothing in it to do her any harm"; but those that she reserved for her own reading were different, and she generally had the discretion to keep

them out of the girl's way. She seemed in a better humour than usual that evening, and had curled her hair elaborately.

"Mark Bassett is a very good-looking man still," she remarked.

"Oh, yes," said her mother. "The Bassetts were all good-looking."

"It's a mercy that his wife died so soon—they quarrelled so badly."

"Perhaps not entirely her fault," said Mrs. Sorel.

"Oh, one must make allowances for a man of that kind," said Clare.

"How? Why, Aunt Clare?" said Agnes, looking up.

"They can't all live like maiden aunts, as goody-goody people expect them to do," said Clare, but she looked a trifle confused.

"There is not much of the maiden aunt about Mark Bassett; but we must make allowances, as you say, Clare," said Mrs. Sorel with her queer smile.

"He's very agreeable," Clare went on. "It's a blessing to speak to any civilised person again, after spending weeks shut up in this God-forsaken place."

"Wouldn't '*man-forsaken*' be more what you mean?" suggested Mrs. Sorel.

"Well, one's as bad as the other, if not worse. He's some one decent to speak to, anyway."

"Oh, yes," said her mother; "Mark Bassett wears very well—there is a good deal of what Malory calls '*the blazon of a gentleman*' about him."

"What does that mean, grannie?" Agnes asked, looking up from her work, and the old woman laughed kindly.

"Can't you see, child? It's not easy to explain."

"Is it a good thing, grannie?"

"Well, Agnes, it's an ornamental thing; some people get on very well without it."

"Can Americans have it?" said Agnes.

Mrs. Sorel laughed again. "George Washington had it, certainly, Agnes; but I don't know if there are many of them with it nowadays."

"But, grannie," said Agnes, looking up at her eagerly, "that American boy, that Captain Bassett was speaking about, was the very politest person I ever saw—so *quick*; but he wasn't at all like Captain Bassett."

"Did you ever hear such language from a girl of Agnes' age!" exclaimed Clare. "The way she speaks sometimes is like a child of ten, and comparing a man like Mark Bassett with that absurd American boy!"

"Tastes differ about men, as about other things, Clare," said Mrs. Sorel.

"Do *you* think Captain Bassett is a nice man, grannie?" said Agnes.

"That is a child's word, Agnes, to describe a man," said her grandmother, smiling; "yes, I do think so—he has a gentle nature."

"Oh!" said Agnes, "not very; do you think so?"

"He would always be gentle to everything weaker than himself, I mean; and that is all the gentleness a man wants."

"Nellie is a good deal afraid of making him angry," said Agnes.

Mrs. Sorel laughed. "I daresay she is; but what I said was true, all the same."

"Agnes never sees any respectable people here," began Clare. "How can she know anything, shut up in a house like this, in a place like Ponde? I'm sure a few months of it are bad enough!"

"It is a pity that you cannot just make the best of it, as you have to stand it for the present," said her mother.

"How can I make the best of it?" Clare went on. "How can I, after what I have been accustomed to, be contented with obscure provincial people like Mrs. Ingraham and her brother—a dough-faced curate with

ninety pounds a year—and her eternal children ; this after St. Petersburg ? ”

“ But, Aunt Clare,” Agnes ventured to say, “ I always thought you said that you hated Russia.”

“ So I do ; I hate my miserable dependent position, and the jealous, illiterate women that I have to live amongst. But I have seen very different society. How can a woman who has lived with some of the great people who make history be contented in a cage like this ? ” Clare was always throwing out gilded suggestions about her past, to which her mother listened with locked lips in silence. “ If it had not been for other women’s jealousy ” (this was a constant complaint) “ I might have been an archduchess now, instead of merely a governess, and a slave to the most inferior people ! ”

“ There are jealous and illiterate women everywhere, English as well as Russian,” said Mrs. Sorel at length. She gave a little hard sigh as she rose, leaning on her cane, and limped from the room.

Agnes went to bed also, leaving Clare lying on the sofa reading her French novel. When she reached her own room, the girl stood by the window looking out into the warm summer night. The harvest moon, large and golden, was hanging low in the sky ; through the wreaths of blossom about her window she could see a little way down the street. At an open casement in one of the tiny houses, there was a girl leaning forward looking out. A man stood on the roadway, his head almost on a level with the sill of the window. They were laughing and talking together. The strong scent of stocks and flox, and various flowers growing in the cottage gardens, came up like spice and honey upon the air of night. Far away she could see, beyond the low, thick orchard trees, just a glint of the river, struck by the moon, shining like silver and gold.

CHAPTER VII

AGNES went to Little Widger on the following day. The visits she paid there were always a pleasure to the girl. Although the old people were very old, and the quiet house was very quiet, it was an entire change from her home atmosphere, and she was allowed to do pretty much as she liked.

The little parsonage smelt faintly of cinnamon and mould, for the rooms on the ground floor always had an earthy smell, and Mrs. Lascelles used some kind of pot-pourri made up with cinnamon, the scent of which hung about the house. The very sounds seemed to be all muffled, like the noises in a dream. The postman was an anomaly; the daily newspaper an intrusion. Mr. Lascelles, with his dry, rather empty, delicately featured old face, and thin, deliberate voice, and his wife, whose voice was pitched on a still higher and thinner note, and who wore a cap with strings that tied under the chin, looked like figures out of some old print. Picturesque enough, interesting survivals, but for all practical purposes as useless to the girl as if they had been the china figures on their own drawing-room mantelshef. They belonged to the class of old people who have acquired the prejudices of age without its wisdom, and who live like children in a world of their own.

They came out to meet Agnes when she arrived, and welcomed her very kindly with dry kisses, and little courteous exclamations about her fatigue, and the heat and the long drive from Ponde.

"I hope your grandmother is quite well. Have you left her all alone?" said Mrs. Lascelles when Agnes came into the drawing-room.

"Yes, thank you, Aunt Caroline, she is quite well; and Aunt Clare is at home just now, so she is not alone."

"Ah," said her aunt.

"Oh," said her uncle. He adjusted his spectacles, and presently, in a very careful voice, asked Agnes if she knew how long Clare was going to stay at Ponde.

"She's going away again in autumn, and after that going back to Russia, I think," said the girl.

The usual silence which fell after Clare's name had been mentioned in that household now descended upon them all. Mrs. Lascelles broke it by telling Agnes that an American lady was coming in that afternoon.

"It's Mrs. Woods, isn't it, Aunt Caroline?" said Agnes, eager to change the subject. "Not Elma Woods' mother, but another Mrs. Woods that I saw at our school dance last year?"

"A very charming woman," said Mr. Lascelles. He regarded Mrs. Woods and her sister-in-law with interest, and slightly aloof approval. When Elma's mother, some two years before, had taken a house in the neighbourhood, he had at first approached the acquaintance with great caution. Americans were things he had heard of, certainly, but hitherto had never seen. A haze of almost Georgian prejudice still encompassed his views of their nation. He was not very sure of their forms of religion—nor, indeed, that they had any; they might, literally, have worshipped the Golden Calf for all that he knew—as was the case with most of the villagers also. They, however, were acute enough upon one point—all of them, from the squire's gamekeeper and the railway porter at the nearest station, down to the ancient woman who shuffled amongst the letters in a dark room called "Post Office" at Little Widger, charged double price to them for everything, because all Americans were very rich.

Far enough as was this grovelling idea from Mr. Lascelles' antique and fastidious mind, he still connected them, and especially the charming stranger, with liberality and excitement. Liberally she had contributed to the fund for the children's school-feast, and had recently suggested, and herself carried out, several very stimulating new ideas connected with it.

She often arrived at the church door in her sister-in-law's motor, and she talked to him about her own country in a way that astonished him.

"Very patriotic!" he would say, in a tone that implied "Very singular!"

Terence, too, by his mannerliness had won approval. "He is a very promising lad," said Mr. Lascelles, "very attractive, like his mother, and with a degree of politeness that surprises me. I confess that I had no idea they could raise a boy like that; there are little differences, of course." He waved a hand. "But nothing—nothing to speak of!" He was just telling Agnes how much he liked them, when in the middle of the conversation Mrs. Woods and her son came in.

They were received with the curious, slow courtesy that made the American lady remark afterwards, "Very beautiful and interesting, but requiring more time than I have ever had in my life!"

First, there was pleasure expressed at the sight of the visitor; then a hope that she had not found the walk too hot; then an inquiry about her sister-in-law; then they were offered tea; and finally, after a restful pause (during which Mrs. Woods said to herself, "Never mind! He'll work round to it in time—before Christmas, perhaps!"), Mr. Lascelles said that he had received her kind note, with its most kind enclosure, and if he could trespass on her time so far, might he ask her to discuss a little farther with him some of the points suggested in it?

During this prologue Terence had been talking, eating, and looking very hard at Agnes Sorel.



A VILLAGE ON THE EDGE OF THE MOOR

"Now, I've heard your Cousin Elma speak like that at school," said Agnes, laughing her low, rare little laugh. "She calls it 'waving her flag.'"

Terence laughed too. "We have to do it now and then—just when we feel jealous."

"But do you really like America best?" said Agnes wonderingly. She shared her uncle's feeling, that for Americans to prefer their own country was very singular.

"Why, yes! You prefer your own country, I should think."

"Of course! Who wouldn't!" said Agnes indignantly.

"Well, we wouldn't, you see; we like our own best."

"Why are you always wanting to be like us, then?" said she.

"*We're not!*" Terence contradicted her with a hot abruptness, very unlike his usual manner. "We don't want it at all." His face had flushed up.

Agnes was sorry that she had vexed him, but she would not give in.

"Should you be offended if any one took you for an Englishman?" she asked.

"No, I don't believe I should; but you'd be offended if any one took you for an American!" he retorted.

"Now, wouldn't you?"

"No one *could*," said Agnes.

"That's not the question."

"If I were an American, beautiful like your mother, I should be glad."

"Now you're getting out of it," said Terence. "You haven't courage to say what you think!"

"But I have!" said Agnes; she leant against the tomb they stood by, and looked up at him, a very faint colour rising in her face. "I'd rather not be taken for an American woman, or for a Scotchwoman, or for anything in the world but an English one."

"What would you do if you married an American?"

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UNDER A GREAT YEW TREE

"I'd make him come over and live in England," said Agnes simply.

"Oh no, my lady, you wouldn't; you'd just have to go and live with him—in New York, or perhaps even in Buffalo or Chicago. Why, the very psalms that your uncle was reading yesterday tell you that: '*Forget also thine own people and thy father's house!*'"

Agnes did not answer; she moved along the flagged pathway till she stood under a great yew-tree, which flung its shadow half-way across the little field. By the edge of the path there was an old tombstone, on which the letters were cut unusually deep and large.

A wide prospect opened from the low wall of the churchyard. The row of elms that grew by the wall had all their lower branches lopped off, so that they stood up almost like a colonnade of pillars, and the distant landscape lay far below as if on a map. It made, between the grey stones and the stems of the trees, an almost bewildering piece of colour—rich as an Emperor's garment with purple and blue; that blue distance, almost always visible at some point or other, was the great beauty of the district, the neutral tints of the foreground making it ever a fresh surprise.

Terence looked up at the tower of the church, square, strong, and grey against the sky; then at Agnes, who, with her face outlined against the black branches of the yew-tree, looked like some pure blossom. "Well," he said, "there's nothing like that little old church in the whole of America; but there's nothing in the whole of little England that is like some of the things we have there."

"What things?" Agnes asked incredulously.

He stood with his hands in his pockets, looking at her for a minute in silence, his mouth tucked in at the corners and his eyes shining; then suddenly burst out with, "Oh, freedom and hope for the whole world, and a new chance for every man, and the battle of life—not just

each one stepping into his father's shoes as you do in this country ! ”

“ But what do you call the battle of life ? ” said the girl—she had her own ideas about America. “ Business ? ”

“ Business ? ” he said quickly, echoing the slight note of contempt in her voice. “ Well, then, *just* business, whatever *is* one's business—making shoes, or selling pork, or soldiering, it's all the same. What does it matter as long as you do it ? To aspire, even if you don't get what you want—to ‘ fall in the first fight ’—that's being a man, I think, and I don't care a dime *what* he does ! ” He stopped, ashamed a little of his own eagerness, then went on : “ Oh, yes, but I do ; I want to do the soldiering myself. We're not *all* pork packers, you know ; I haven't even an uncle in the business ! ”

“ Is there really a new chance for every one ? ” said the girl.

Something in her voice impressed him.

“ Why, yes, we think so, if there's anything in them. Have you a friend in that line ? ” he asked, laughing.

The sudden blench and change that came over her face warned him that he had touched on dangerous ground.

“ Come, let us look at the stones,” he said. “ Any knights here ? I must get my mother to sing the ‘ Knight's song ’ to you ; she sings adorably, not like any one else—tells you a story all the way along.”

“ This is not a knight,” said Agnes, “ but I think it's interesting.”

They stood together and read the inscription cut deep and large upon the plain stone :

IT : WAS : THE : DESIRE :
OF : HER : WHO : LIETH :
HERE : UNTIL : THE :
RESURRECTION : THAT :
HER : BONES : SHOULD :
NOT : BE : MOVED

“ There's love of country for you ! ” said Terence. He

looked away for a moment to the blue distance. "I'm not surprised! Look at all she must have seen before she lay down to wait for the Resurrection. Now who was she, I wonder? My mother would make a ripping story out of that, if you asked her."

"Couldn't you?" said the girl. "I think you could make them, too."

He coloured a little and laughed, "Perhaps I've caught the trick from her."

"Go on," said Agnes, as one child speaks to another.

He sat down on the edge of the wall, and swung his feet, and snapped with his hands at the gnats and whistled to himself softly, gazing all the time at the low door of the church, the flagged pathway in the sun, the grey stones humbled amongst the grass. Suddenly he began: "They had quarrelled and he had gone to the wars, and been away for years and years and years, and then he came back—he went to look at his brother's grave——"

"Why brother's? Wouldn't mother's be better?" said Agnes.

"Why not father's or uncle's or cousin's or grandmother's?" he retorted. "Is this story yours or mine?"

"Well, please, brother's then—I know it is all right. Go on."

"*Brother's* grave; and when he came out she was standing there in the sun."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, and quite enough, too. It spoils them to tail 'em out, mother says. What would you make out of them?"

"Oh, I don't know. I always thought she had been miserable, and been away for years in a foreign country."

"She perhaps had been so foolish as to marry an American!" he interpolated with a grin.

"There weren't any Americans to marry in those days," said Agnes tartly. "I think she came back to die at home, and did not want ever to leave it again."

" Mine's the best," said Terence, jumping off the wall.
" Yours is a rotten kind of story, I think."

" Yes, I think so too," the girl agreed.

They sauntered back to the house together, walking with their light young footsteps across the turf that covered the dust of her who waited there for the Resurrection. Youth and the glory of it, their heritage for their own little hour.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. LASCELLES had nearly finished his explanations when they returned to the house. He accompanied his visitors down to the gate, still making a few careful remarks on the same subject, to which Mrs. Woods listened with a smile. Agnes lingered beside her uncle.

She had hoped that Mrs. Woods would have shaken hands with her, too, and spoken to her again before they left; but, having achieved a suitable farewell to Mr. Lascelles, the lady forgot in her hurry to look at Agnes at all, and only when she was turning away caught sight of her outstretched hand. Her quick intuition read the disappointment in the girl's face. She stooped her gracious head and kissed Agnes' pale cheek with a soft, perfumed kiss that made the unmothered child suddenly frank. She clung to the lady for an instant, and hugged her with all her might.

"That's enough, dearie; good-bye! We'll see you again; you must come over and see us often," said Mrs. Woods, resettling her displaced hat and patting Agnes on the shoulder. Her eyes were full of tears as she turned away.

"Isn't she a *child*, tho' she's so tall; but she's knocked my hat all awry, and crushed all my frills!"

"Mother, you'd think about your hat on your death-bed, I believe!" said Terence, laughing.

"Spare me the hat at that moment, dearest; it's not

usually worn in bed. But that child goes to my heart. Do you suppose those dear, dried-up, prehistoric old relics are all the relations she has ? ”

“ She lives with a grandmother at home, she told me.”

“ A great-grandmother probably. Gracious ! what tenacity of life there is in these quiet Devonshire villages, amongst all classes.”

This was added as she stepped into the post-office, and cleared her throat, before proceeding to bawl slowly at the highest pitch of a naturally clear voice a request for a twopence-halfpenny stamp.

“ Go you on, Terry,” she murmured to him. “ Perhaps after ten minutes of ‘ close personal dealing ’ I may be able to make her understand that I don’t want a box of matches, or a dozen pearl buttons ! ”

But Terry stood at the post-office door and looked up towards the parsonage, till his mother after a few minutes succeeded in making her request understood, when the old woman allowed her to select the stamp for herself from a drawer containing several varieties.

“ There’s some cloud over that poor child,” Margaret Woods began when they had resumed their walk home together. “ Elma says it’s something about her father, but she never heard what it was.”

“ Elma’s a curious little cat ! What business is it of hers ? Mother, dear darling, your hat’s all awry on the other side now,” said Terence, laughing at the clutch she made at it in a moment.

A girl kissed by her lover for the first time could hardly have been more excited than Agnes was by Mrs. Woods’ embrace.

“ She kissed me—kissed me ! Oh, how lovely she is ! ” she kept saying to herself, and every now and then would put her hand against her cheek and laugh in her delight.

All that evening she sat with Mrs. Lascelles, silent, and



THE SLOPE OF THE MOORLAND

sewing very badly, at some little bit of work. The old lady did not approve of a young girl being what she called "immersed in a book" in the "public sitting rooms," so, though it seemed rather funny to Agnes to think of that still little room as a public "sitting room," she always tried to sew there instead of reading as she did at home. This evening she could not have read a book with any interest, for her thoughts were always straying back to Mrs. Woods and Terence, and she repeated to herself ten times over, every word that either of them had said.

The very next morning Terence came to the parsonage, along with Elma Woods. They took Agnes home with them, and after this, in some way or other, they met almost daily. Elma's brothers, who were older than Terence, were both away from home, so, as Elma said, "He's just able to have things entirely his own way." But it was a very gentle way, if it was so, and even Agnes, who was no great judge of character, could see how the boy resembled his mother. The woman's quick tenderness, and the buoyant disposition that was eager to taste the beauty and interest of life, yet could take the bitter along with the sweet, smiling over it all, were traceable in her son too.

The summer had been long and hot. It was followed by a rich, bright autumn, when the perfume of the sun-burnt land, full of harvest fields and ripening fruit, rose up to the September skies: the hedges were so hung with berries, with hips and haws, with briars and brambles, that it seemed as if men, as well as birds, might have feasted there and been satisfied. Sleek wood-pigeons rose from the fields, fattened thus early upon grain; even in the higher and bleaker lands around Little Widger the footsteps of a prodigal summer seemed to have left colour and plenty behind. The slope of moorland behind the church, which had been in August as red as wine, was flushed still with a warm glow, and the thin

grass on the farther slopes was golden, almost like the fields of corn.

Mrs. Woods came over with Elma to the parsonage one afternoon.

"Aunt Margaret's going to the post-office, as she always does," said Elma when they were going away. "I think she *eats* stamps during the night. Won't you walk up the lane with me, Agnes?" she asked.

Mrs. Woods turned down to the post-office, and the two girls walked on by themselves. Elma's chatter was all of school, and the holidays and so on.

"Don't you enjoy being at home very much when your aunt is here?" asked Agnes, who was always trying to make Elma talk about her heroine.

"No," drawled she; "I guess I'm not romantic enough for Aunt Margaret. She is very good, and of course she's a lovely woman, but I'm not her kind of girl. She likes them very clever, or else with large eyes and a history." Here she gave a sort of trip in her speech and spoke a little quicker than usual. "I'm neither, so I'm only just her own niece wanting a good deal of improvement; however, you can have her! *My*"—the word turned in her mouth like a corkscrew—"mother's good enough for me, I guess! Terence won't swagger quite so much when George and Bill come home; they keep him down a bit."

"Oh, he doesn't swagger," said Agnes, and Elma laughed.

"Don't you believe it! Why, he thinks there never was such a one only darling of a son belonging to any mother before in the world, and never will be again, you bet he does!"

They walked slowly along in the sun, up the steep lane with its golden walls, which were mixed now and then with holly, showing sorrowfully black amongst the riotous colours of autumn. Then they heard the sound of horse's hoofs drumming on the hard road, and presently Terence came riding round the corner of the lane. The horse he rode—

a fine little black one—went like a dancer on the tips of her toes, shying at every shadow. Terence looked as if he were enjoying himself mightily. He stopped for a minute to speak to the girls.

"How did you get Barker's leave to ride Goblin?" asked Elma.

"Quite simple," he answered; "didn't ask it—took him myself when he was out!" But Goblin would not stand still for another instant, and darted down the lane with a clatter.

Agnes, standing silent whilst the others were speaking, thought how good Terence was to look at, as full of nervous life as the animal he was riding, his thin face—brown now—alive with pleasure and excitement; the bright sun shining on him and round leaves from the hedges strewn like golden guineas on his road.

She had been angry at Elma's remark a moment before, and now, as Terence rode away, she turned to her, saying indignantly: "He doesn't swagger; or if he does, you all do!"

"Now, Agnes Sorel," said Elma, standing still and speaking with her usual deliberation, but with a slight flush on her cheek, "you've just got to take that remark back—right here—or I don't walk another step with you!"

"I'm very sorry, Elma," said Agnes, blushing painfully, "but you made me angry. I don't think Terence does swagger at all. I'm sorry; it was very rude of me."

"It *was*," said Elma deeply. "But you're all the same—all of you, always. You pretend to like us, and you come and are pleasant enough; but all the time, deep down in your *cold hearts*"—she drew the words out impressively—"you're criticising us, just like a toad at the bottom of a well." The simile was confused, but the manner was striking.

Agnes looked up with tears in her eyes. "Oh, I don't,

Elma! Indeed, I don't! If you only knew! I think—I *know*—I have never seen any one in all my life that I thought so lovely or so delightful as your aunt. I would kneel at her feet if I might; and Terence is the nicest boy I ever saw."

"Aunt Margaret is all very well, in her way," said Elma. "She *has* a great many good points; but Terence is just a particularly ordinary sort of boy. I could show you half a dozen better in New York in ten minutes! That Dana Gibson kind of face is as common as daisies now; they all look like that, and we can make as good as Aunt Margaret any day."

"I'm sure your country is full of delightful people," said Agnes eagerly.

"Oh, we don't pretend to be like you! That would be 'swagger,'" said Elma, tossing her head. "But we have just a few, here and there, like Aunt Margaret and the President."

Agnes laughed, and they walked on together quite reconciled. Elma was going home by a short cut across the fields, so they parted at the head of the lane, and Agnes turned back again towards the parsonage. She walked slowly, hoping she might have the good luck to meet Mrs. Woods on her way back. Presently she heard the clatter of a horse's hoofs, and looked up expecting to see Terence; then stood still with her heart in her throat, for there to be sure was Goblin, black and glossy, coming up the yellow lane, shying from side to side; but the saddle was empty and the reins hung trailing loose amongst his feet.

Agnes called out to him by name as he came near. The creature turned a bloodshot eye upon her, stopped for an instant, trembling, then, making a wide curve, dashed past, and galloped round the corner of the lane.

Agnes looked back to see if Elma was still in the field; but she was no longer to be seen.

"He may not be hurt after all," she kept saying to herself, as she ran down the lane, glancing fearfully from

side to side, dreading at every turn what she might see, the rustling of her own footsteps amongst the yellow leaves the only sound she heard, drawing her breath more freely as she turned each corner and saw the road empty in front of her.

CHAPTER IX

ROUND the next corner the road narrowed between higher banks as it sloped more steeply up-hill. There was a blue sky behind the golden trees ; a breathless air ; the happy landscape shone with all the decorative richness of the autumn hedges.

Then Agnes saw a heap of stones by the roadside ; round about it the soil had been all mashed by the stamping of a horse's hoofs ; and Terence lay fallen horribly across the stones, with his face turned up to the sky.

She knelt down beside him, and tried to lift him into an easier position, but he was too heavy ; she could only raise his head a little and slip her arm beneath it. She stanchd the blood that was oozing from the wound as well as she could with her handkerchief, and unfastened his collar. There was no water within reach ; there was no one in sight anywhere. She felt afraid to leave him lying there unconscious whilst she went to find assistance. Once or twice she called aloud, but there was no reply. At last, after what seemed to her a long time—it was really only a few minutes—she heard the noise of wheels, and cried out again.

A little cart piled up with straw, with two men in it, came round the corner of the lane. Hearing the girl call one of the men jumped down and ran towards her.

When they saw what was the matter they took off part of the load as quickly as possible, and between them managed to lift Terence into the cart.

"'E's not dead, miss, but badly 'urt," said the older of the men, whom Agnes knew by name. "Where'll we take 'im to?"

"Oh, take him to the parsonage; it's nearest," said Agnes. She set her teeth as she heard the groan that Terence gave when he was lifted into the cart.

"Climb in, miss, and 'old 'is 'ead, and we'll take 'im as soft as we can," said the driver.

Agnes got up and lifted Terry's head on her lap, supporting him as well as she could.

The cart moved forward at a snail's pace, for every jolt made him moan again. The blood came oozing through the handkerchief that was wrapped about his brow, and stained it red. Once he opened his eyes with a blank stare, and the next minute fell unconscious again. It seemed as if ten miles instead of a quarter of one had to be traversed. The girl sitting with Terry's head on her lap and her eyes fixed on his face, looked more than ever like the little mermaid in the tale, when she held the drowned prince's head upon her knee.

During that painful quarter of an hour she had time to notice the queer look of Terry's long, varnished boots amongst the straw, the limp deadness of his hands, the inert weight of his body as she supported him on her arm. It seemed as if they had been moving on in that cart for hours. When at last it stopped by the parsonage gate, and she saw Mr. Lascelles, who had been in the garden, come running out, she could hardly get breath enough to explain what had happened.

"Bring him in here. Lift him gently, my men! There, that's better! Agnes, run in and tell your aunt," he called.

They carried their burden slowly into the house, and Mr. Lascelles sent a man off for the doctor. Then he came up to Agnes, saying, "Mrs. Woods, poor woman, must still be in the village. She has never passed the

gate. I was in the garden the whole time. Let some one fetch her at once."

He was hurried out of his usual slowness of speech, and Agnes exclaimed instantly, "I'll go, Uncle Timothy; I'll tell her."

"Very badly hurt, Agnes; better tell her the worst."

Agnes waited to hear no more. She ran out into the quiet, empty road—her uncle's man on horseback had just ridden off for the doctor, the men who had carried Terence into the house had gone on to the inn to collect an audience for their tale; there was not a creature stirring, only a cat visible at one of the doors, as she opened the garden-gate and ran out. "*Her son! Her son!*" she kept saying to herself; girl as she was, scarcely more than a child, the possibilities of an unknown anguish seemed to open before her as she ran with such a message to this mother.

The gate of the churchyard stood wide open. The sun was striking on the flagged pathway as she ran down the roadway, and darted into the dark little shop at the corner.

The old woman was groping there amongst a pile of letters. "There's been an haccident, miss," she whispered hoarsely when she saw Agnes. "Susie she's just run down to the inn to 'ear more. Jim Widger 'e called in in passin'."

"Yes, yes, I know. Has Mrs. Woods been here?" Agnes shouted as loud as she could.

The post-mistress stopped and sniffed and shuffled. "Woods? 'Es, it's the young gentleman from Amerika, miss; the 'orse fell and rolled on 'im, says Jim. 'E's as dead as an 'errin', pore thing, 'e says."

Agnes seized her by the arm, and in a few minutes got her to understand what she wanted.

"'Es, 'es, she was in 'ere no time ago—one dozen two-penny-'apenny stamps, miss; she's gone into the church now. Susie saw 'er go."

Agnes waited to hear no more. She ran out of the shop, the old woman following her to the door. By this time quite a number of people—women, boys, and children—were beginning to stream up the road to the parsonage, all ready now to assist her with information.

"She went into the church 'alf an hour ago, miss, for Tommy saw 'er from the window. She's right in there."

Two or three of the women, murmuring amongst themselves, followed her into the churchyard. They stood in a knot near the door, hoping for a sensation, their hands rolled in their aprons, their faces full of a kind of gleeful sympathy. The account of the accident had already made some progress. There were exclamations of, "'Is 'ead cut *open* as with a sharp knife!"

"'Twas the stones as did it. Pore thing! 'E'll never lift 'is 'ead again!"

One fat woman commented with gusto, "The 'orse fell and rolled on 'im till 'e was *squeezed*—just *squeezed* like a lemon. Jim saw it with 'is own eyes."

The air was very still: the swallows dipped so low in their afternoon flight that they almost touched Agnes as she ran towards the church door; it stood ajar, and she pushed it softly open and went in, crossing the threshold, where she had often read the words cut deep in the stone,

EARTH, TAKE MY BODY TO THY GRAVE;
BUT MY SOUL THOU CANST NOT HAVE.

The door was very heavy, but it swung open without a sound, and she stood still on the threshold. The church at first seemed to her to be quite empty. Shafts of light fell on the granite slabs of the pavement, and touched the austere stone pillars, each cut out of a single block; there was no sound within. Then Agnes heard something stir behind her. She looked round and saw that Mrs. Woods was in one of the pews to the left of the altar. Her gloves and her little chatelaine bag were laid on the bench beside

her. Alone there, a stranger in a foreign country, with bent head and her hands covering her face she knelt and prayed. Agnes stopped for a moment in utter astonishment. This was the sort of thing she knew nothing about. In her own home religion was never mentioned, and when she stayed with her uncle church services were just a necessary part of life there, conveying very little meaning and no emotion to her mind.

How strange this was ! The awe of it held her silent for a moment. Then she walked across the church, and at the sound of her footsteps Margaret Woods arose, settled her hat, and rearranged her veil ; she looked like an angel, thought the girl.

" Well, dear ? " she began, seeing Agnes approach ; then, catching sight of her face, she seized her by the arm. " Is there anything the matter ? " The tone was short, almost stern.

" There's been an accident ; Terence—— " said Agnes, but before the words were out of her mouth the woman had caught their meaning, and a strange change, quick as lightning, all in a second hardened her sweet face ; the colour flew into it for a moment, then ebbed from cheeks and lips till she was as white as death. She had left the pew where she had been kneeling, and was half-way across the church before Agnes had time to turn round.

" They've taken him to the parsonage," called Agnes, hurrying after her. Again the motherless girl was hurt by the quick gesture with which the woman brushed her aside as if she had been a fly. She never heeded her ; she flew, she vanished—she did not seem to run, yet she had reached the garden-gate before Agnes had crossed the road. The crowd of women followed gaping. The door of the parsonage was open ; just for a moment Margaret halted—there was a drop of blood on the white flagstone at the door.

Mr. Lascelles came to meet her, and led her without a word into the room where Terence had been laid.

"He's opened his eyes," said one of the maids to Agnes when she came up a minute later.

Agnes did not like to go in, but stood by the door and listened. Presently she heard a voice that sounded very strange say, "Mother!"

In an instant, clear as an angel's voice, came the reply, "*Yes, my son!*"

"How in the world could she speak like that!" thought the girl; her own voice was choked, the tears rushed into her eyes and blinded her, as she stood and heard it.

Mrs. Woods came to the door for an instant. "Go and look after your aunt, Agnes; Emma is helping me. Tell her he's regained consciousness; we can't do much till the doctor comes." Her face was curiously calm; she even smiled for a moment at Agnes' frightened look.

The doctor arrived just as the girl moved away. He spoke two words to Mr. Lascelles, then followed him into the room, and the door was shut.



CHAPTER X

BY night-time the quiet parsonage hardly knew itself. A nurse had arrived at nine o'clock, and after dinner, as Agnes and her Aunt Caroline sat in the drawing-room, Mrs. Woods came in. She looked an older woman by ten years than she had done six hours before, but she was quite calm again, and came up sweetly to thank Mrs. Lascelles and to express her regret for the trouble caused to her household.

"He's very badly hurt," she said. "His leg is broken, and his ribs are broken, and he's all smashed generally"—she gulped a bit to steady her voice—"but he's going to come through all right in time, and, dear Mrs. Lascelles, you must not make yourself ill with anxiety. We've got the nurse, and Agnes will help—won't she?"

"Oh, yes, *please!*" said Agnes, squeezing her hand.

They persuaded Mrs. Woods to have some dinner, and though Agnes could see that all food was dust to her that night, to please the old lady she made believe to eat and drink. Her courage was a miracle. When Mrs. Lascelles tearfully congratulated her on her boy's 'preservation,' Agnes saw her wink the tears out of her bright eyes as she answered, laughing,—

"There's not over-much 'preservation' about him, just at the present moment; but we are thankful for the fragments that remain!" Agnes heard her aunt murmur something about "a slight tendency to flippancy" when speaking to the Rector about it afterwards.

Mrs. Woods' things were all arranged in the large guest-room, a chamber that for years had only held the belongings

of visiting clergymen. The table, with its tiny, dim old oval mirror, was covered with her toilet appurtenances, some of her clothes were lying on the high, white-curtained bed. Agnes was to be allowed the bliss of occupying the dressing-room opening off this now enchanted chamber.

A curtain had been hung outside the door of the room where Terence lay, in order to deaden the sound. The kitchen was unwontedly stirred, the old maidservants sympathetic and flurried; whilst the sick-nurse, in full uniform, was moving about from bedroom to kitchen quietly executing her own despotic pleasure. Old Mrs. Lascelles had been much agitated all day, but she was now afresh concerned lest Mrs. Woods should not have everything that she wanted, and lest the embarrassing demands of the sick-nurse should not be instantly and literally fulfilled.

She stood in the dining-room, wringing her delicate, shrivelled hands. "A *small* tray," she said to the housemaid. "Is there not a *small* tray in the house, Joan? Get one of the silver salvers for her, and she wants two teaspoons and a wineglass, and a good-sized china plate; and she wants an armchair."

"There's no armchair as she can 'ave, ma'am, unless one from the drawing-room, or master's study chair, and it's so big; but there's a chair in the blue bedroom, now, ma'am, as all our visitors use."

"Yes, but it's a *wicker* chair, Joan; she says that won't do."

"There's no other, ma'am."

"Well, then, we must just send up the large armchair from the study, Joan. Get the gardener to help you, and have it carried up now."

It was done, and Mr. Lascelles watched, with an expression of polite surprise, the armchair he had used for thirty years in his study being hoisted away.

"She says that will do, ma'am," was Joan's report.

"Did you ask her if she would like anything for

herself through the night, Joan ? ” the old lady inquired anxiously.

“ Yes, ma’am, and she said as ’ow any little thing would do. She only just wanted a slice from the joint—cold like—and any cream or fruit as might be over from table ; and she was particularly fond of a custard, and only just a glass of Burgundy along with her supper, and then some bitter ale and biscuits the last thing, and nothing more except just the tray with the syphon, and a small teapot with cream and sugar, and some plain bread and butter, or a bit of muffin, and two slices or else the loaf, to make ’erself a bit o’ toast, and the kettle for ’ot water, and just about a breakfast-cupful of fresh milk with an enamelled pan to warm it in ; and if there was any plain light biscuits she might just ’ave one or two of them, and a mouthful of cheese. *She said as ’ow she always tried to give as little trouble as possible and make no extry work as could be ’elped.* She can eat very little through the night, so might she ’ave a fresh cup of tea brought to her at six. Mrs. Woods’ goin’ in then ’erself, and nurse’d like ’er bath at eight ; and if she might ’ave a light breakfast about ’alf-past nine—just a little Quaker Oats and cream and some tea and bread and butter ; and if there was a bit of cold meat—she wasn’t set on bacon, but she was fond of a plain boiled-soft egg in the country ; or a mouthful of Devonshire cream and a muffin, and she ’oped you wouldn’t be concerning yourself to make yourself anxious, ma’am, for she’s got nearly everything she *really* requires, except the nightlight and a black blind for the window—them old-fashioned white blinds is no use ; and will we please to wrap each piece of coal in tissue-paper and send up a pair of gloves—any old pair of master’s gloves will do, she says—to keep quiet in the room ; and the window must be open from the top, but that can be done to-morrow, she says, as it’s not hung ; and there’s nothing else except the spirit-lamp and a shaded light, and two cushions—for the study armchair will do very well if she can ’ave a small foot-

stool and a thick shawl and a fur cloak." She paused to breathe.

"Very well, Joan," said the old lady, with a faint tremble in her voice; "if you just repeat the things again in order, we shall see what we can arrange."

By eleven o'clock, when the nurse seemed to have been provided with everything under heaven, quiet settled over the house at last. Agnes could not sleep at first and wakened several times during the night. Each time it was to hear Mrs. Woods creep out of her room to the door of the sick-room, and then steal silently back again. She relieved the nurse early in the morning. The girl who had wakened with the first glimmer of light, listened to her moving about; and then, when she heard her go away to Terence's room, turned to sleep again, with a child-like thought of how nice it was to lie warm and still in the grey dawn, when other people had to watch by the sick.

"Only I would do it—I would do it, too, if they would allow me," she murmured to herself as her eyelids closed again.

Inch by inch, during the painful days that followed, the cloud lifted, and the anxiety in the house lessened gradually. Agnes had never been in the sick-room, but she could hear Terence speaking now and then. The voice was strange at first, broken and hoarse; then, as days passed, sometimes his mother would come in laughing and cheerful, to repeat how he had joked with her.

"If he's very good all day, you're to be allowed to see him to-morrow, Agnes," she said one morning. "I'll just let you in for a bit, without saying anything to other people, because you're such a quiet little mouse, and he wants to see you. But if he saw my sister-in-law, or Elma, we'd have him ill again in half an hour!"

So Agnes came softly into the room next day, half afraid to enter and look behind the screen, with the tender shrinking, the shyness of suffering, that all young creatures feel.

The subdued light, the bareness of the accustomed room denuded of most of its furniture, the smell of antiseptics, and the tense little smile on Mrs. Woods' face as she led her in, all frightened her. For just a minute she stood at the foot of the bed speechless: her first thought was of a broken doll, his head was so queerly bandaged up, and looked so stiff upon the pillow. His face was as pale as plaster, the brilliant eyes suffused with tears of weakness; but he smiled a strange sweet smile, and stretched out a long, thin yellow hand to her. Agnes caught one warning glance from his mother, and with a supreme effort she swallowed the sob in her throat, and coming up to the bed, softly took his hand in hers, and held it as she sat in the chair beside him.

"Agnes," said Terry, "I'm better. I'll soon be all right." He had never called her by her Christian name before. "Don't you let mother kill herself altogether, will you?"

They seemed to have made a great step in companionship. Every day after that Agnes came in to read to him, so as to take some of the burden off his mother. The girl watched the relation between mother and son with a new understanding. It was her first sight of love.

There was nothing too menial for this beautiful lady to do. On her knees, with a duster, she would grub around the floor of her son's room. She would soil her hands with coals, lest a sound from the fire-irons should disturb him, or soak them in liniments and antiseptics without a thought. She would read to him till her voice failed in her throat. Ten times in the night she would rise from her bed to run to his room and listen if he stirred. She would hardly allow the nurse to take her share of the work. She tended him, washed him, bandaged him. She would have served the servants, if that would have helped him. She made his bed; she would have carried up the nurse's breakfast with her own hands, had Agnes permitted it. But that

attention, and the making of that functionary's bed, fell to Agnes' share, who helped the over-worked servants as much as she could.

Nothing, however, impressed the girl so much as the way all this offering of love was accepted by Terence: without astonishment or protest, with no thanks, excepting now and then a glance that passed between them, or a tightening of his fingers on his mother's hand. It was the Divine Right of one who knew himself a king—the king of another's heart.

"Don't you love her for doing all that?" Agnes said one day, when Mrs. Woods had gone out of the room.

"No, I don't," said Terence. "I love her *without* doing all that!" He laughed.

He had begun to get better by this time, and was allowed to sit up in a chair. They were playing bezique together, and he lay back among his pillows rather impatiently watching Agnes, who shuffled the cards badly.

"No, you mayn't have them—you must let me do it," she objected when he wanted to take them himself.

Mrs. Woods came in, and stood looking at them, thinking it a pretty sight. Agnes was so grave, and dealt the cards out with such a careful hand.

"Now, children," she said, "I hope you're not quarrelling! Has Terence been good, Agnes?"

"I'm too good for this world, mother, only I just wanted to shuffle the cards, for she does it so abominably!"

"That's what Elma says," said Agnes. "You always want to do everything better than any one else."

They laughed and chattered away, like the children they were, Mrs. Woods watching the clock that Terence might not be tired by sitting up and talking too long.

CHAPTER XI

AS Terence got better and the anxiety decreased, the outward and visible signs of illness, so strange in that household, became gradually accepted. Margaret Woods belonged to the few people who can be interested in their own affairs, and yet keep eyes and ears for others ; so she proved the most delightful of guests, and Mrs. Lascelles would not hear of their going when Terence was first able to be moved. Agnes, who watched Mrs. Woods with the intensity of girlish devotion, saw how the lines had deepened on her face, and read under the gaiety of her manner the constant watch, closer than that of any nurse or doctor, which she kept both night and day.

The closeness of the tie that bound this mother and son was a revelation to the girl of something she had never imagined before ; it made her own position seem all the more lonely. Though Margaret's motherliness was not of the kind that saw only her own child amidst a world of children, and though she gave to Agnes freely of the crumbs that fell from his table, still, of course, her whole heart was set on Terence during his illness. As he began to recover, the sweetness of his nature showed more strongly. It is comparatively easy for a convalescent to smile and speak cheerily for ten minutes to admiring visitors ; but the one who can begin a new day, after a sleepless night, without a whine in his voice, or, harder still, go back to bed utterly tired out, without a grumble, by four o'clock in the afternoon, has, as the old writers would say, made considerable " growth in grace."

Agnes was in a new world when Terence was first moved into the drawing-room, and she sat there with him and his mother and listened to their talk. Mrs. Lascelles used to retire to her husband's study, for she thought too many people were bad for "the invalid," as she persisted in calling Terence, to his great disgust. Then Mrs. Woods would sing, or read aloud, or she and Terence would talk while Agnes listened. Till in the sunshine made by two mirthful, energetic people, the girl's cold heart warmed and expanded—

As Arctic creature dimly stirred
By tropic hint.

She would laugh now and again—soft, sudden little laughs, as she never did at home—and it was her greatest pleasure to be allowed to fetch and carry for Terence, laughing at the embarrassment it caused him that she should do his errands.

Mrs. Woods used to sing to them a great deal—all the songs that Terence liked—accompanying herself on the funny old piano that sounded as if it were miles away, so faint were the jingling notes. The favourite song, which she patiently rendered over and over again, began—

My ornaments are arms, my trade is war,
and was called "The Knight's Song." It ended—

Some day may find
My fate more kind,
Some night kiss thee,

and she sang it "as if she had been a knight-errant herself, in a previous existence," as Terence used to say.

It happened one evening that Agnes got a letter from Clare whilst she was sitting with them.

"Aren't you going to read your letter, dear?" said Mrs. Woods, seeing her lay it aside, and thinking that she was doing so in order not to interrupt her game with Terence.

"Oh, thank you, it's only from my Aunt Clare," said Agnes, but she took it up and opened it.

"DEAR AGNES," it began, in Clare's thick, black, sprawling handwriting,—“Can you remember where you put a handsome piece of green trimming that I gave you one day before you left home? I want it for a new dress I bought at the sales, which is all wrong in the collar. I've looked in your room and can't find it. Mother is all right, and everything here is as dull as usual. I am glad you have had the Americans in the house, as, ill or well, they will be more lively than the Lascelles—effete old things, with the mould growing over them and the minds of insects. Are the Americans rich? They usually are. It might be worth your while to be pleasant to them, in that case; you might make something of it, even if the boy is too young to marry——” The last words were all crammed into a corner of the sheet, but as Agnes spelt them out she blushed all over her face, and quivering with anger, crumpled up the letter and threw it into the fire.

"News doesn't please you?" Terence inquired, looking at her hot face.

"No," said Agnes, and began to deal out the cards. But she could not attend to the game, and she answered all at random when spoken to.

After Terence had gone off to bed, when Agnes came up to say good-night, Mrs. Woods looked at her, saying tenderly: "Is there anything the matter, child?"

Agnes burst suddenly into tears, and buried her face on the older woman's shoulder. "There's always something the matter. I'm not happy; you can't understand," she sobbed, "and now you're going away, and I shall never see you again!"

"My poor child, I'm so sorry! Yes, of course you will see us again—we're coming right back in a very short time."

The kind arm about her, the mother's face above her,

soothed the girl. She dried her tears and went to bed comforted.

After she had gone Margaret Woods sat for a long time, thinking so deeply that she even forgot to go and see if Terence was all right. She looked up with a start when Mrs. Lascelles came softly into the room, drawing her thin silk skirts across the carpet with the curious creepy sound that always heralded her approach.

"I trust Terence is not too tired?" she said.

"Oh, no," said Margaret. "He's only sleepy after being out for the first time. Agnes has gone off to bed. She's a dear girl," she remarked after a pause.

"Yes, a dear child—she resembles her poor mother," said Mrs. Lascelles.

"She has an aunt on her father's side who is living at Ponde just now, I understand?"

"Ah! Clare Sorel—yes," said Mrs. Lascelles. She paused, and then added very deliberately, "We have had no acquaintance with her for many years."

Margaret felt she could say no more, and deftly changed the subject; but before she went to bed that night she wrote a note to her sister-in-law, telling her that she and Terence would leave the parsonage and return to her house upon the following Monday. For all her tender heart and her kind impulses she was a wise woman, who had seen much of life, and she said to herself:

"I must ask Mrs. Ashton when I see her next, what it *really* is. She is sure to know. Elma says it's the father. At any rate, we're going away on Monday."

And poor little Agnes, who had caused her so much anxious thought, fell asleep, saying to herself:

"I must tell them before they go. Terence would never respect me if he knew I hadn't courage to tell him. I don't mind even if he won't be friends with me any more afterwards, but at least he'll know the truth."

During the past week she had been drawing new inspiration—new life almost—from the larger, happier

natures she had been brought in contact with for the first time. They had touched her with their influence at the most impressionable age. Whole new horizons opened before her. It was not any special creed or set of phrases—it was a new vision, that came by their means into her soul. In her childish enthusiasm she probably saw them brighter than they really were, but their inspiration was the same—a breath of life, full of hope as the wind that blows from the gates of the morning.

CHAPTER XII

"WE shall go to church, my son, and give thanks for your recovery," said Margaret Woods to Terence the next Sunday morning.

"Very well, mother, I can hobble as far as that ; and you can do the most of the thanking, ' with your usual felicity of expression,' as the newspapers say. You're coming, aren't you, Agnes ? " he said, turning to the girl.

"Yes, I'm coming," said Agnes, looking downwards as if she were fastening her gloves. *They* might be going to give thanks, but it was a different thing for her. The next day they were leaving the parsonage, and would sail for America immediately after Christmas. The bright companionship was ended. Never sanguine by nature, she did not value herself sufficiently to suppose that they would have time to remember her when once they had returned to their own country. The separations of youth seem for eternity always.

"Come, children, we shall be late, and Terence must not walk too fast," called Mrs. Woods from the gate, where she was standing with Mrs. Lascelles. It was a windless November morning, with just enough sunshine to brighten the lemon-coloured leaves that still hung on the elm-trees by the churchyard wall. Terence would not take Mr. Lascelles' arm ; he held up his head and walked slowly by Agnes' side through the garden, and up the flagged churchyard path, smiling in acknowledgment of the greetings he received from the village people. He went and sat with his mother when they got into church. Agnes,

from her place beside her aunt, noticed that Mrs. Woods had chosen the pew where she had been kneeling that evening when she had heard of Terry's accident.

She was very bravely dressed, this lady, for her thanksgiving service. There was a flicker of amusement on Terry's face as she drew her silken skirts aside to let him pass into the pew. Her gown made a spot of hyacinth-colour in the grey church, and the eyes of every girl in the congregation were fixed upon her hat. She sat with her head bent, and the full white eyelids cast down, her hands clasped upon her knee—never looking at Terence at all. He, too, bent his head, though he could not kneel down when Mr. Lascelles read out in his precise and delicate way :

"Also Margaret and Terence Woods, strangers in this parish, desire to return thanks. . . ."

As the congregation rose to sing the last hymn, Terence stood up with one hand on the edge of the pew and the other resting on his mother's arm. He looked much graver than before his accident—even at that age, pain leaves marks upon the face; but he stood very straight, and Agnes, from her corner in the parsonage pew, saw his bright, fearless glance pass like the glint of a sword round the church, till it rested upon her. He had his mother's quick, sympathetic sense of beauty, and the girlish figure, the young pure face, set like some white blossom beside old age, appealed to his imagination.

They were delayed by people coming up to inquire for Terence as they came out. Agnes went and stood by herself, waiting until they joined her. Terence came first, alone, limping a little as he crossed the grass to where she stood. He looked at the church with its low, pointed doorway, its square tower, its exquisite dignity and proportion—set down there in a lonely, unknown country parish, amidst a tiny hamlet—one of a thousand such in places equally remote. He stood gazing at it

with his head thrown back, whistling softly the last bar of the hymn they had just been singing; then turned, his eyes flickering with laughter, and said to Agnes:

"You know, I was just longing to buy it and take it home with me!" Agnes was too dull to respond to his jests. "That's the sort of thing *you* think we're always thinking, don't you?" he went on. "You know, my aunt, Elma's mother, *did* offer to buy that little carved figure of a pelican standing on the tip of its toes, from the top of one of the old stalls. She wanted it on the end of her staircase at home."

"I know. My uncle has never forgiven her," said Agnes.

"I'd buy that old chap in there, with his feet on his shield, like a shot, if he'd let me—and build him a little Gothic chapel all to his own self when I'd got him. You're not angry, Agnes, are you? You know I was only joking. What's the matter?"

"Nothing. I'm dull to-day; I'm sorry you're going to-morrow."

"So am I; but we'll see you again when we come back to my aunt's at Christmas."

"Yes, I suppose so; but it won't be the same."

"No, of course it won't! I shan't have a broken leg—if that's 'the same'; but it will be quite as good."

Agnes did not trust herself to speak. She shook her head and looked away between the stems of the tall trees at the distant country, lying far below, all dim and folded into hills and valleys, like a map tinted with soft colours.

"What's wrong, Nancy; won't you tell me?" Terence asked, coming nearer, and leaning on the wall. They could hear Mrs. Woods' high clear voice in the distance, still talking with some one by the church door.

"Nothing—nothing I can tell you just now. I will tell you when you come at Christmas, just before you go." She wrung her hands together; her "mourning eyes"

looked—as Mark Bassett had said long ago—“as if she could weep black tears.”

“I’m not very happy at home,” she said at last. “You can’t *ever* understand; you’ve got your mother and everything—and I—oh, don’t ask me any more! I wish you were not going away. It has been so happy, your being here.”

“I don’t understand quite——” he began.

“No,” she said, “of course you don’t! I will tell you what I mean at Christmas—if you come back then.”

He stood looking at her curiously, pursing up his mouth, just as his mother did when she was puzzled about anything. “Very well, then! That’s a bargain. If it’s anything I can help you with——”

“No, no; it isn’t. No one can help it. Don’t ask me any more about it now.”

She forced herself to smile and look up at him where he stood beside her—a pleasing sight indeed, full of alert life and promise; his eyes lit up by that “Lamp of zeal and high desire, which God lights for most of us when life is young.” Small wonder that she, whose life had been so oppressive, whose imagination was hungry for something bright and free, away from her own chill corner where she grew like a lily in the shade, turned with her whole heart towards him, and loved him where he stood.

She hardly knew the meaning of the word. She was conscious only of the high enchantment that filled the time when they were together: of the simplicity with which she could talk to him as she had never talked to any one before. Now he was going away for ever and ever, and the future would contain nothing for her at all.

“Come, children, be quick, or we shall all be late for luncheon!” called Mrs. Woods. They turned to follow her, for she had walked on with Mrs. Lascelles.

The sky was coloured like a pearl. One by one the leaves came wavering down through the still air. The

ancient clock from the tower struck with a single broken musical note as they crossed in silence the little space of roadway that divided the parsonage from the church.

The American turned for an instant to look back.

"It's beautiful, all of it," he said. "But I'm glad we're going home."

Agnes made no answer, but walked silently into the house.

CHAPTER XIII

" I WON'T say good-bye, for I shall see you again at Christmas," said Terry, lingering for a moment at the parsonage gate.

" Oh, yes—I hope so—perhaps," said Agnes.

" It's not perhaps, it's certain. We're coming back, and I'll see you then. I'm going to Nellie Bassett's party, she asked me herself; you will be there, won't you ? "

" I don't know," said the girl. She did not meet his eager eyes, but looked upon the ground.

" Well, anyhow, I'll see you before we go to America—unless the Fates intend to break some more of my bones. Good-bye just now."

She raised her eyes as she gave him her hand; the next moment he was gone.

Agnes turned slowly back into the house, without once looking after him.

Next day Terence and his mother went off to London. In the train Mrs. Woods seemed to have a bad headache; she would not read or talk, but sat back in a corner of the carriage with her eyes closed. Her face was sallow, and her eyes looked tired. Now and then she gave a little moan, as if of fatigue.

When they arrived at their hotel she went off at once to her own room, saying that she was too tired to sit up longer.

Nearly an hour later Terence knocked at her door, softly.

" Come in ! " she called.

"Oh, mother, have you not gone to bed *yet*?" he exclaimed.

Margaret was sitting in her dressing-gown by the fire, with a writing-case on her knee; her eyes were very dry and bright.

"Now, this will never do! You are to go to bed at once, madam. We'll play that you are the 'invalid,' as Mrs. Lascelles used to call me, and I'm nurse now." He began to lift her writing things.

"Terence," she said, "I want to speak to you."

He stood with his back to the fire, looking down at her.

She rubbed her hand wearily across her eyes. "I've been thinking, Terry, that I am too tired, with all the anxiety I've had lately, to run about any more. I can't be troubled to go back to your aunt's for Christmas. I'd rather just stay on here, and get all my business done quietly before we sail."

"Right! I'll put you to bed, and nurse *you* up a bit for a change. You're tired out, you dear thing!"

"No, no, it's not that. I'm only just needing a little quiet, and the thought of a large party again at Christmas is tiring. We could amuse ourselves very well alone in town for ten days, couldn't we, Terry?"

"Why, yes—for ten weeks if you like." He looked at her with a sudden glint of comprehension in his eye that she did not notice, then stooped to kiss her. "Go to bed, mummy, like a darling, and rest, and don't worry about me or anything else."

"All right. I'm just writing to your aunt, and I shall tell her not to expect us back again."

Terence went away and she finished her letter, shutting it with a sigh of relief. "Poor child! poor child!" she said to herself. "If I had only myself to consider it would only make me love her more, but I *daren't* risk it after hearing that story; he will forget whenever we are at home."

The day before they had left the neighbourhood Margaret Woods had gone over to Owlscott, Captain Bassett's house. She had found Mrs. Ashton at home, and when they were alone together, had asked her (coming round to the subject with such tact that Mrs. Ashton thought nothing of it) if she had known Agnes Sorel's father?

"I've heard that there was something sad about his history," she said.

"Don't you know?" said Mrs. Ashton, and told her.

"What emotional creatures Americans are!" she said to her brother afterwards. "Mrs. Woods got quite pale when she heard it. The tears came up and up until they brimmed over her eyelids and fell on her knee; her hands were shaking like anything when she said good-bye."

"Umph!" said Mark, "*that* wouldn't mend matters for poor little Agnes, I'm afraid. We must get her to come to Nellie's party, Jenny," he added. "The child has never any fun over there at Ponde with Mrs. Sorel and Clare! She's better off with the Lascelles, old as they are. Nellie and I will go over and ask her as soon as Nellie comes home."

But he went alone the very next day, without waiting for Nellie.

It was a still winter afternoon, when the air seemed filled with a soft grey smoke, that grew denser towards the sea, and drifted like a grey veil across the ruined hedgerows and the empty fields.

Agnes stood by the parsonage window looking out at the quiet, colourless landscape.

She was feeling very dull, for the house seemed curiously still after their American guests had gone.

"It has been quite an experience," said Mr. Lascelles, "and should have taught us all a lesson in international charity, to find how delightful it has been to have enter-

tained our American friends for so long. The little differences"—he waved his hand—"are neither here nor there."

"I fear that dear boy won't live," said Mrs. Lascelles.

"Oh, why?" asked Agnes—finding to her relief that the old lady had only the time-honoured reason to give that Terence was too pleasing.

"Early chosen, I fear, his sweetness and patience were quite unnatural."

"But he gets angry just like other people, in a minute and a half," said Agnes, "before you've even time to know what it's all about; and I think he's rather selfish about his mother, for he wouldn't let her out of his sight even when she was ill and tired, and he is very fond of his own way, and he *eats* so much, and he *will* talk about America as if it were better than this country, and he is *always* wanting to do everything better than any one else, for Elma tells me that her brothers can't get on with him a bit. Terence would never acknowledge when he had been beaten; he would kill himself to just go a little farther than some one else, she says—but of course, she's his cousin!"

"Ah, cousins don't always see each other in the best light," said Mr. Lascelles. "As to the other faults you mention," he went on carefully, "at that age most young men have large appetites, and all young men of spirit are ambitious. I had my ambitions once myself," he added, adjusting his spectacles and opening the *Spectator*.

Agnes looked at him, wondering what they were.

"Here's Captain Bassett coming in, Aunt Caroline," she said.

"Ah, Mark Bassett, he is always welcome," said Mrs. Lascelles, with whom Captain Bassett was a great favourite.

Mark came into the room a minute later, bringing with him a pleasant suggestion of fresh air and action.

His shoulders were all finely powdered with the spraylike damp of the mist outside.

"I hear that your American friends have gone," he began, seating himself beside Agnes. "*You* will be quite forlorn without them—that little chap was being petted to death amongst you."

"Why do you always call him 'little'?" said Agnes. "He's taller than I am, and I'm not little."

Mark looked at her, amused to notice how her shyness had somewhat worn off since he had seen her last.

"Well, no, perhaps he's not little after all—slim, and boyish, and all that." He crinkled up his eyelids which had little fine lines at the corners, and laughed. "When one is in the forties, Mrs. Lascelles, seventeen, or even eighteen, seem wonderfully far away. How old is your lit—I mean your young American?"

"He had a birthday when we saw him first last year, and he was eighteen; but I think he's younger than most people, because he's been so much with his mother."

"Well, I suppose they're off now to their dear New York, and motor-cars, and Delmonicos, and Palm Beach, and all the rest of it," said Mark, who rested easily on the conventional idea of Americans.

"I think he's gone off to work very hard at West Point," said Agnes indignantly, "and his mother goes to Washington."

"West Point, is he? That's where they make their little tin soldiers, and learn some of their braggadocio way of speaking?"

"Their soldiers are the best in the world, he says," said Agnes, suddenly roused to testify against her own conviction.

Mark smiled at her. "Of course they are! that's just what they are always saying; you just wait and see!"

"But don't we say so too?"

"We may think so, perhaps; but, saving Mr. Kipling, we don't generally *say* so—before other people, anyway."

"But every one thinks so, don't they? Germans and ourselves and every one?"

"Yes, of course they do; and the Americans are to beat us all, they say. Mrs. Woods was a nice woman, good through and through, and she wore her clothes very well, too. Your little fellow will come out all right in the end, I've no doubt." He stood looking down at Agnes. "Are you coming to Nellie's dance at Christmas—you will still be here, won't you? Mrs. Lascelles will surely allow you to come? Nellie is asking scores of girls I never saw or heard of, and she thinks it's going to be a grand affair."

"I'd rather not, thank you," said Agnes, speaking almost in a whisper. She hung her head and fluttered her eyelids for a moment in embarrassment.

He understood at once. His face softened, and coming a step nearer, he said in a voice that Mrs. Lascelles could not hear, "But Nellie wants to have you so much. I heard her saying so when she first spoke about it. It's all right, child, every one will be glad to have you."

"No, no," said Agnes, turning away, even as she gave him her hand. "I'd *rather* not, please; you don't understand."

"I think I do. But you must overcome that feeling, Agnes. You live too much with old people. Come to Nellie's dance, like a good girl, or I shall think you are sulking for your little American playfellow."

He spoke with a kindness that made Agnes like him better than she had ever done before, and turning to the old lady, begged her permission. "It's really just a children's dance after all, for Nellie is only a little girl still—less than Agnes here; but she has got her aunt to promise that she may ask whom she chooses, and she is to order the supper—as far as I have heard, it seems to be all ices and cake—and we've all got to dance as hard as we can till midnight."

"Oh, Aunt Caroline! Please, I think I should like to go," said Agnes.

"Very well, you shall go," said Mr. Lascelles, smiling, "if your grandmother allows you. A certain amount of gaiety" (he might have been measuring the gaiety out in drops into a teaspoon from the precision of his speech) "is always good for the young, I do believe."

"I quite agree with you, sir," said Mark, laughing. "Very well, Agnes. I'll tell Nellie that you will come—subject to Mrs. Sorel's permission?"

"Oh, grannie will let me come," said Agnes. She smiled faintly and looked up at him in her soft, childish way as he said good-bye.

"That child is growing up," he said to Mr. Lascelles, who went with him to the door. "She'll be a young woman in no time now. How old it makes me feel, when I remember her mother at that age!"

"Yes, yes. Poor Nancy! She was a beautiful creature in those days!" The old man stood still and faced Mark, speaking with something like fierceness in his thin, dry voice.

"It was the saddest thing I ever saw, Mark. She would do it! We did our best to prevent it. I never gave my real consent, and in a year it was all over."

"Austin Sorel's time should be up one of these days," said Mark, looking meditatively on the ground, one hand resting on his horse's neck. "I understand that his health has suffered very much. What on earth will become of them all, when he does come home? Mrs. Sorel and that child?"

"With Mrs. Sorel we have *no dealings*," said the rector. "She and her unfortunate daughter are people it is impossible to assist. Pride, irreligion, and passion—the Sorels are all alike!"

Mark rode away then, and Agnes, standing by the window, watched horse and man disappear into the thin grey veil of fog.

She felt quite hot and angry at the way he had spoken about Americans. "Who was he to criticise Terry—an elderly person like him?" she thought. With the candour of youth she weighed him in the balances, refusing to admit any superiority.

CHAPTER XIV

ONE afternoon about two days before Christmas Margaret Woods came back to her hotel in the chill darkness, tired but triumphant, for she had finished an hour's struggle in the suffocating, crowded shops. Now she proposed having tea comfortably in her own room, and resting by a good fire until Terence came in and it was time to dress, for they were going out to the play in the evening. She had kept Terence very well amused ; even London fog and December darkness left many joys to them when they could go about together. Together that very morning they had gone to buy a Christmas gift—at Margaret's own suggestion—for Agnes Sorel. She had been a trifle surprised when Terry selected a little chain, studded with glittering stones ; it cost much more than she had meant to give, but her swift mind realised that this was not the moment for discussion.

" Yes, of course, it would be just lovely for a young girl. I should like to send her something *very* nice. We'll have this, I think." She took out her cheque-book.

" I'll pay, mother ; you can settle with me afterwards," he said.

The jeweller smiled as he laid the little ornament in its case, and saw how Terence put it in the breast-pocket of his coat. " We can send it round immediately, sir."

" Oh, no ; I'll just take it with me. It's all right," he replied.

Then after luncheon it had been produced again, and Mrs.

Woods with a girl's gaiety entered into the pleasure it would give Agnes to receive it. She sat writing some charming lines upon the card that was to go along with it. Terence, meanwhile, weighed the fragile thing in his hand, his fingers looking very big crossed by the golden chains, little thicker than threads, that clasped a glittering drop here and there.

"I think that's rather sweet—now will that please her, Terry? I think she'll like it; and we must get something *very* nice for Mrs. Lascelles. I think a——"

"I must be off, mother," said Terence, jumping up. "I'm sorry I haven't time to go with you to buy it."

"Take this and get it registered," she said, holding out the little parcel to him. He took it with a smile. She thought how well he was looking.

"Where *are* you going, Terence?"

"Tell you when I get there. Good-bye just now!" He nodded to her from the doorway and was gone.

Late in the afternoon, when she came in with all her purchases made, and had sat down by the fire in comfort, the chambermaid brought her a note.

"Mr. Woods said I was to give it to you whenever you came, madam," she said.

It was only a line. "I'm tired of London, mother most beloved, and I want to spend Christmas in the country. I'll be at Aunt Elma's till Monday. Take care of yourself, like a good woman, and make what excuses sound best for me to the Browns' to-morrow night. I'll give your little present to Agnes Sorel."

Margaret read the note twice before she burnt it; there were tears of vexation in her eyes.

"My little present!" she said, laughing at herself. "Well, we're sailing on Tuesday, thank Heaven! I hope the guardian angels have been mothers—some of them—in a previous existence; then there may be some chance for my boy!" But presently she rang the bell for the

chambermaid again, and gave her a telegram to send off to Terry. "All right. Have a good time. Merry Christmas.—Mother."

Elma, only the week before, had told Agnes that Mrs. Woods and Terence were not coming back for Christmas. Agnes had returned to the parsonage alone in the winter dusk. She was very silent all that evening.

The day before Christmas had been dark and still ; she had gone out to do some errands in the village and was just going back, when she heard some one calling her, and looking round saw the small girl who assisted at the post-office, waving an envelope.

"'Ere's a telegram, Miss Agnes ; it's for yourself, auntie says."

Agnes took it a little anxiously, fearing that her grandmother was ill. She tore it open and read the message as she went up the steep road. How the winter twilight seemed transparent about her ! How a hundred songs sounded in her heart ! "*See you to-morrow at Owlscott. Keep a dance for me.—Terence Woods.*" She crumpled it up in her hand and lifted up her head for a moment to the dark sky. There, between the branches of the elm-trees, was a bright star. Agnes paused by the gate, and breathed a deep breath in the quiet chill air : the December twilight was as fresh as spring. Her eyes sparkled as she entered the house. Mrs. Lascelles, looking at her, said suddenly :

"Agnes, you are growing up so ! You will be quite a woman presently !"

"I'm eighteen nearly, Aunt Caroline—isn't that *quite* old ?" said Agnes, laughing.

The next morning came dry and fine, with just frost enough, but neither snow nor wind, so that the air had scarcely any bite in it ; and in the evening Agnes drove off to Owlscott in the calm dusk, alone in the queer old parsonage carriage.

The house of Owlscott stood facing southwards in a deep

wooded glen. High moors rose behind it, and on either side were steep little hills covered with oak-woods. Just before the house the narrow glen opened out, so that from the broad bit of ground in front you could look down to where a stream wound about between high wooded banks, till again the prospect was closed by the swelling of the moor.

Nellie's party began early, as Mrs. Ashton had decreed it must stop by twelve. Agnes arrived from the parsonage before the other guests. She knew that Elma Woods and Maria Briggs were staying in the house ; several of their school-companions were coming too ; and she felt suddenly shy, and sorry that she was there at all, as she stepped out and stood in the hall. It seemed a happy house that night, with a festive air, an open door, a welcome for every one. "*And just everything,*" she thought, "*that I haven't got !*"

But in another moment Nellie, in her white frock, came flying downstairs to hug her with a warmth of welcome that made the chill feeling melt away.

"I'm all ready," she said. "Elma and Maria Briggs will go on dressing away for another half-hour, I suppose. Come into the drawing-room, and let me look at you !" She pulled Agnes by the hand, both of them nearly slipping on the glittering boards in their excitement. Agnes had on a pair of high-heeled shoes for the first time.

"Do you know that Terence Woods is coming ?" Nelly went on. "He's come all the way back from London, and only arrived last night. It's quite nice of him, isn't it ? for only a little girls' party like mine. Elma says the President travelled sixteen hours *just* to record a vote about a mayor, though, so I suppose it's American to do that kind of thing, but I like it !"

"I'm glad he's come," said Agnes, with a little choke in her voice. She followed Nellie into the drawing-room—a long, low room now cleared of nearly all its furniture.

"Let me look at you now," said Nellie, pulling her into

the light. "Why, you've got your hair up! It looks so nice. Will it hold, do you think?" she inquired anxiously. She turned Agnes round and looked at her with careful approval. "It's *very* nice, I think—how does it feel?"

"A little queer at first, but I've had it up for some time. I was seventeen last birthday, you know."

"Where did you get that frock? I like it too."

"Oh—that?"—Agnes looked down at it indifferently, she did not take much interest in her dress—"that's a gown of my Aunt Clare's which she was tired of, and gave to me. It's been cleaned and I took the trimming off. Grandmother made me do that. It's nice enough."

The gown she wore had been a gift to Clare; she might well have called it "nice enough"—as Nellie, with her childish interest in dress, had speedily found out. It had formed part of the wardrobe of the real young archduchess (she who figured so largely in Clare's stories), who had worn it once or twice before she gave it away. Clare had transformed it after that to suit herself, with much trimming; but when, at Mrs. Sorel's command, the sequins had been removed, there remained what was a beautiful dress for a young girl. It seemed to be all made in one piece from neck to hem, of very thick, dull white lace without any trimming at all. The transparent sleeves disguised the angularity of the girl's long, thin arms. Her black hair was, as Nellie said, "only half up," in a great lump at the back of her neck. The last six months had altered her wonderfully. Now, in her white dress, the faint colouring—not deep enough even to be called sunburn—where the sun had kissed her, took off the coldness of her pallor. She had a long neck and a small head, and always the same grave, unchildlike sorrow on her face. She looked a very different figure from little Nellie, bursting with health and high spirits.

"Agnes," said Nellie, gazing at her, "I believe you will be thought quite good-looking. Elma Woods is here, and

Myrtle James, and I had to ask Maria Courteney Briggs ; it's quite like school, isn't it ? Terence Woods is coming over later, but Elma is staying in the house."

The two girls Nellie spoke of came into the room as she was admiring Agnes—Elma Woods with a huge white bow on the top of her head (*her* hair, to her own chagrin, was not up yet), Maria Briggs with her round face and button of a mouth, and the manners of a second-rate woman of twenty-six. She came sauntering in, spreading a fan and glancing about the room.

"I dressed early," she said, "so as to be in good time to help you to receive, Nellie."

"Oh, Aunt Jenny does all that," said the childlike Nellie.

"I'm used to it," Miss Briggs went on, holding out a fat foot in a tight white slipper to the fire as she spoke. "I constantly help mother on her 'At Home' days. You look quite stylish in that dress, Agnes. Where was it made ?"

"My aunt gave it to me ; it's not new," Agnes said. "It was made in Vienna, I think."

"Ah," said Miss Briggs—she touched her trimmings—"mine's Russel & Allan. Who made yours, Nellie ?"

"Aunt Jenny's maid," said Nellie bluntly. "Here's my father," she said, looking towards the door.

Captain Bassett came in quickly, rubbing his cold hands together. He was nerved for the occasion, and ready to welcome all Nellie's little friends.

He crossed the long, empty room to where the girls were standing in a cluster beside the blazing fire. Agnes, taller than any of the others, looked almost a woman beside them. For an instant he did not recognise her ; the beauty and interest of her figure, as she stood there with an arm round Nellie, astonished him utterly.

"Well, upon my word !" he muttered to himself.

Nellie sprang at him, trying to make him promise that he would dance "*all* the time till twelve o'clock."

"Isn't that just a little hard?" he said, laughing.

"But we have so few men," Nellie pleaded. "There will be only the two Cox boys, and one of them so short-sighted that he treads on his own toes; and the Martyn boy, but he has only one ear, you know, so some people dislike to dance with him; and Elma's father, and John Manners and a friend of his, and Terry is not allowed to dance except just once, and the curate and you, and that's all!"

"And how many girls?" he inquired.

"Oh—four of us now, me and Elma, and Agnes Sorel and Maria Briggs—two Manners girls, and a Cox and a Cox cousin, and a red-haired girl whose name I forget, who's living with them, and three Wynnes, and Myrtle James, and her governess, besides Aunt Jenny and Mrs. Woods, and the lady with her, and grandmother and Aunt Eliza. *They* won't want much dancing, of course; but still, even they will find it dull to sit on chairs all the evening."

"Very—I should think so! I'll do my best, Nellie, if you won't be too unmerciful. Who is to be honoured with Terence Woods' one dance?"

"We don't know," said Nellie, suddenly grave. "We'd *all* like it, but I think we shall have to draw lots."

"I can't be bothered with Terence," said Elma in her cool, detached little voice. "He's completely spoilt. I'd rather dance with the ear-boy, Nellie. You only see one side of him at a time, after all."

"I'm not fond of boys of that age," said Miss Briggs in a pensive aside.

"Well, then—I'm in my own house, so *I* can't take him," said Nellie, "though I'd like to. So Agnes had better have him—she's been helping to nurse him, anyway."

Mrs. Ashton now came in with some of the older people, and presently the young guests began to arrive. The hall was filled with them, and a great deal of unwrapping and laughter and talk went on.

Agnes slipped behind Mrs. Ashton, and stood in a corner near the fire. She watched the guests coming in, and once

took a quick look into a mirror that hung on the wall opposite ; but she looked so unlike herself that it only made her more shy.

At last the form of Elma's mother, her fat husband behind her, blocked the doorway ; and behind him, standing on tiptoe to look over his shoulder, was Terence, with his bright eyes searching through the room. They found Agnes in her corner in a moment, long before he had shaken hands with Mrs. Ashton or her brother, and before Agnes had looked up again he was at her side.

CHAPTER XV

"WHY, Agnes, is this you?" said Elma's mother with evident surprise. "You're looking quite beautiful, isn't she, Terence?"

Terence said nothing in words, though his eyes said a great deal.

"Will you dance with me, Agnes?" he began eagerly. "I can have but one, but it's going to be the best I ever had; I've come all the way from London for it."

"You mustn't give it to me—Nellie is your hostess," said Agnes.

"She's too busy speaking to other people. She can't dance now. Come, *quick*—please."

"And Elma?" said Agnes, laughing a little, and hesitating, her face all flushed with faint colour.

"Oh, Elma's my cousin—she doesn't count."

"And all the other girls?"

"The other girls don't know me."

"And the grown-up ladies?"

"They wouldn't look at me; they're dancing or talking to Captain Bassett, and the red-haired one is a giraffe—I won't be tall enough to dance with her for ten years yet! Come, Agnes, do!"

She took his hand, and they went off together. It was what Nellie called "A very chatty party," the musicians consisting only of an amateur violinist and one woman at the piano; but the guests seemed all to be talking and laughing at the same moment.

After her dance with Terry, it seemed to Agnes that every one wanted to dance with her. She was shy and yet

so happy that her face flushed with a faint colour, and she looked almost radiant in her white gown.

Elma Woods, in perfect contentment, danced again and again with the one-eared boy, and Miss Briggs, exceedingly conscious of her own self-possession, was making suitable conversation to a curate—pleased because he was undoubtedly grown-up.

Terry came up to Agnes again. "I mayn't dance any more," he said; "but let us come out and talk."

They went out into the hall together.

"I'm sorry," said Agnes in her grave way, "that you've had such a horrid time this autumn; but you'll soon be quite well again, won't you?" She had seen his eyebrows drawn together as if with pain, and he limped a little as he walked.

"Why, yes. I'm all right now. You needn't be sorry for me. It's just all been very jolly, and I've had an uncommonly good time of it. If I'd as many legs as a centipede, I'd break 'em all to have it over again! I shall never forget it—or the little old parsonage, and Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles"—he added, "*and you*," after a moment's pause.

They had gone out into the hall in search of cooler air. Miss Briggs sat on the stairs, conversing with her curate. She felt that this was the "stylish" thing to do, and scorned the childish romp that pleased her companions.

The hall door was open. Terry looked out. "Oh, come outside—it's delicious out here!" he called.

Agnes caught up a cloak from a heap of wraps by the door, and stepped out along with him.

It was one of those still, bland nights characteristic of Devonshire even in winter. The touch of frost in the air was not sharp enough to sting, and the deep little valley lay glimmering under a hidden moon.

They sauntered on across the wide space of gravel in front of the house, to where the path turned into the wood.

Several other people had come to the door, and were talking and laughing on the doorstep.

"I want to give you a message from my mother," said Terry; they moved on a little farther till the lighted windows flared less on the ground, and the noise within the house grew fainter as the tinkle of the stream that ran through the valley began to be heard.

The pathway underfoot was perfectly dry; not a breath was stirring; the scents of a woodland night, just bound by the frost, made the clear air faintly aromatic. A number of young holly-trees grew in the open spaces between the oaks, which formed the greater part of the wood: their long, glistening sprays sparkling in the moon-shine

When they had gone about a hundred yards Terence stood still. His voice sounded a trifle strained as he spoke. Agnes could see him quite clearly—the reflection shining up from his white shirt-front against his eager young face.

"I want to give you a message from my mother," he began. "I told her I would give it to you. She sent it with her love."

He took a little case from his pocket, handing it to Agnes with a smile. She opened it, and lifted out the slender chain. The stones glittered like dewdrops as it hung across her hands, and she uttered a low exclamation of surprise and delight.

"Oh, how lovely! How dear of your mother to send me such a beautiful thing! I have never had anything so beautiful before!"

"Well, that's all right then. I'm glad you like it," he said.

She looked up at him quickly. "Your mother chose it for me herself, didn't she?"

Terence looked a trifle confused. "Why, yes, we chose it together; won't you put it on—just round your neck now? And I can tell mother I've seen you wear it."

Agnes threw back the collar of her cloak, and slipped the thin little chain over her head. It hung down, dangling its bright drops about her slim throat.

"I don't know what to say about it," she exclaimed. "I shall write to Mrs. Woods to-morrow and thank her, but it's just too lovely for words of thanks at all."

Terence was smiling to himself, well pleased. "They're not diamonds, you know," he said. "I think, now I see it, they look like teardrops, don't they, in this light. I wanted to get something pink." He stopped, for Agnes was looking at him curiously. "My mother liked this; she thought it would look nice on you."

"What makes you look so much amused?" asked Agnes.

"Oh, I was thinking."

"What?" she asked again.

Terry laughed. "About diamonds and the White House."

"Oh," said Agnes; a little tender smile came across her mouth.

Terence moved a step nearer to her, and bent his head. "Say good-bye to me out here, Agnes, before we go back to the crowd. I won't see you again, you know—I must leave so early to-morrow morning."

Agnes looked up at him. "Wait for a minute," she said slowly.

She had taken a resolve, and now she set her teeth and braced herself for a great effort. "Terry," she said, "I want to tell you something about myself, before we say good-bye, because I think that you don't really know anything about my people."

Terence gazed at her in astonishment. "I don't quite understand," he said. "Do you mean your grandmother, and uncles, and aunts, and cousins? What an *English* idea!"

"I don't mean that at all," said the girl. "But you said you would come back some day."

"So I shall ; you won't forget me, Agnes ? I'll come back right enough, but you'll be a grand grown-up young woman and have forgotten all about me !"

"I won't *ever* forget," said Agnes in a trembling voice. "But I want to tell you something before you go—it makes a difference to me in everything."

"Well, nothing can make any difference to *me*, Agnes," he began, with a sudden change of feeling in his voice that made Agnes start. She put out her hand and touched his sleeve, checking the words on his lips—what they were going to be some awakening instinct had given her warning.

"Let me tell you now ; it's about my father."

"Your father ? Is he not kind to you, or what ?"

"It isn't that ; it's something dreadful. My father is in prison—in the convict prison. He killed a man—long ago, when I was a baby. That's why my grandmother lives at Ponde, and why there is a shadow over us all."

She stopped short, drawing her breath in little gasps.

Terence made some inarticulate sound in his throat, and stood before her with his hands in his pockets, gazing on the ground.

The noise of the tinkling water grew louder ; not a word did he say ; Agnes could hear her heart beating in the silence—the cold of ice seemed to steal across it at that moment. Not a word did he say ; yet she had told him bravely enough, though to do so had been like tearing off her own skin. She looked at his downcast face, and saw how pale he had become, and that his eyebrows were drawn together in a deep frown. He was just going to be like other people ; this bright companion, too, would fail her. Why had she ever told him ? She turned and began to walk back to the house, leaving Terence standing alone. She took five steps, counting them on the frozen gravel, and at each step—like the little mermaid again—a sword seemed to pierce her heart.

But before she had come to where the shadow of a tree lay across the moonlit path, he was at her side again.

Agnes turned round, and looked up. She had unfastened the little chain and held it out to him. "Please," she said, "will you take this back? I should have told your mother long ago. I *couldn't*. People are all the same, I know. I can't keep it now that she doesn't know."

"I chose it," said Terry. "I bought it; won't you take it from me?" He bent down and looked into her face. Then held out his hand to her. "Agnes," he said, "don't you trust me?"

Agnes now was silent for a moment; their eyes met, seeking each other's faces in the uncertain light.

"Yes," she said, "I think I do."

"Do it then," said he. "Tell me you'll never think this will make any difference to me."

Agnes gave a little sob. "I do, I do." She put her hand in his. "I will never doubt you again, Terry!"

"Put that on, then!" he commanded, and she put the little chain round her throat once more.

"Now you may say thank you, to *me*," he said.

Agnes laid her hand on his arm for an instant, with a little caressing touch. She turned away her face to hide her eyes, that were full of tears.

Terence and she walked back to the house in silence. As they advanced into the stream of light before the open door she could see how pale his face was, and how his mouth was set at the corners; he looked much older.

The guests were beginning to crowd into the hall, as the carriages came round. "Why, Terence, there you are!" called Elma. "Mother is going away now; we couldn't see you anywhere. You have been standing out there in the cold, and you're as lame as an old horse!" Terence was limping a little as he crossed the hall.

"Good-bye, Agnes," he said. They shook hands, and Agnes went quickly into the cloak-room, without looking at him again. He was gone when she came out.

Captain Bassett took her down to the carriage. He wrapped her up very carefully, and told her to tell Mrs. Sorel that she had been "the beauty of the evening." Agnes scarcely heard what he said. His caressing manner was completely lost on her as he helped her into the small closed carriage, tucked her up in rugs, and bade her good-night.

When the last glimpse of the house with its red windows and open door was shut out by a turn in the drive, Agnes drew herself up in the corner of the carriage, hunching the rugs about her, and clenched her hands. The intolerable pain of parting with all she felt an interest in was hers at that moment—a pain, perhaps possible in all its keenness to the very young only, for they alone have the reckless generosity to place their whole centre of romance and interest in one spot.

She remembered some stupid little verses that she had read somewhere that autumn :

My home lay still in the shadow,
His lay in the sun.
I longed in vain—what he asked for
It straightway was done.
Once I staked all my heart's treasure.
We played : and he won.

The steady grinding of the wheels on the rough, steep road set her teeth on edge ; she was shivering with cold—a chill at her very heart, it seemed.

It was quite dark as they drove through the narrow lane where the branches almost met above. Then came a long hill, when the driver got down and walked by the horse's head. He drew to one side to let the Martyns' carriage pass ; Agnes heard the voices and laughter of its occupants as its lights flashed by.

Again at the top of the hill the road ran clear in the moonlight ; young holly-trees, their slender stems shining

like grey satin, stood every here and there about the high, broken banks.

Far off the open fields and high moors in the distance were suffused with pale light. The church clock was striking one as she got out at the parsonage gate—as it had struck the shining hour when she stood there with Terence ; now it was midnight of the heart with her.

CHAPTER XVI

"THERE'S nothing left remarkable beneath the visiting moon!" said Agnes to herself as she looked up at the grey sky. She had just read in the newspapers that the Woods' ship had sailed. Now, for an indefinite time, she felt there was nothing left remarkable in her world any more.

"I must get the better of this," she kept saying to herself, walking quickly up the deep lane, as if the hurried motion would help her. At the corner there still lay the heap of stones by which she had found Terry lying unconscious, with his face turned to the sky.

She hurried past it till she was out of breath with walking so quickly; then leant on the gate that led into the field and looked about her vaguely, seeking some comfort.

Delicate breaths of winter air, cold and fresh, touched her face; the fields and moors, the sky and earth, the mists above the distant sea, were all one faint, harmonious grey, just touched with colour here and there where a holly-tree showed darker green, or a bit of ploughed land a patch of purple. High above her one of the little squeaking hedge-birds twittered out its notes.

How big the world was! And how curiously empty for her just now! Would she ever again feel any interest in her life at home?

She was not naturally hopeful, and she realised how unlikely it was that she would ever see Terence again. He had told her he would come back, but that was before

he knew her secret. What would his mother say when she heard it? The sea that now divided them did not seem so real to her as the gulf of misfortune that lay between his life and hers. She never flattered herself that it would "make no difference," as Terence had said; young as she was, she knew better than that. Something in the grey sky and the quiet-coloured earth seemed to comfort her; but it was with the chilly comfort that age offers to youth—suggestions not of hope, but of patience.

"I will work hard when I go home, and study all that I can. I will try to be nice to grannie, and I will not think about him—at least, not more than I can help." The saving clause made her feel less dreary, and she turned to go home more cheerfully.

She met Captain Bassett at the parsonage gate. He had not seen her since the night of Nellie's party, and he noticed at once how pale and tired she looked. He walked beside her, talking very kindly, and her face brightened a little as he spoke.

The "League of Youth" is silent, but exclusive; without a word its members draw their own invisible lines of demarcation. To Agnes, Mark Bassett was very much on the same level as her Uncle Timothy—not quite so old, of course, but "Nellie's father," and therefore in a different world from theirs.

She was perfectly unconscious of any admiration that she aroused in him. If he looked at her, she thought it was only because she was a friend of Nellie's. She asked him now to come in and see her uncle, and when he refused, turned to bid him good-bye at the door.

"When do you go back to Ponde?" he asked.

"I'm going on Monday," said Agnes.

"Ah! I'll come over and see you then."

"But Nellie will have gone back to school?" said Agnes.

"Won't you have anything to say to me without Nellie?" he said, looking at her, laughing.

"Oh, yes, of course; I'm sure my grandmother will be glad if you do come," said Agnes.

He looked at her, stared at her for an instant, then laughed a little shortly and turned away.

All of a sudden the girl felt her face grow red. She stood still, looking after him, filled with astonishment and dismay. Her grandmother's words, "Agnes, you will be a fool if you don't marry if you ever can!" and their connection, came back to her with a new meaning. Her heart beat quickly as she ran into the house.

Captain Bassett appeared at the parsonage the very next day. Agnes could not escape, for she was sitting with her aunt when he was shown into the room. But she retreated to the farthest corner she could find, and spoke very little. The new, terrifying thought that had taken possession of her made her dumb; some ancient dread stirred at her heart; she felt like one who walks alone in a wood in an unknown country, and was afraid. The man was handsome, gallant, and agreeable, admired by most women, but the only effect that he produced on her was this sensation of nameless dread. It made all the greater contrast to her feeling for Terry—there lay the sunshine and the open ground of her heart; she would have put her hand in his, and followed him to the end of the world, without a thought.

Mark Bassett, meanwhile, talked to Mrs. Lascelles, and looked at Agnes with kindness enough in his bold eyes. She, sitting very still in her corner, crouched back against the sofa, noted how the firelight touched his strong, flexible hand and the line of his shaven cheek. No man of his disposition could possibly have understood that the girl, instead of being flattered by his admiration, was distressed by it into an agony of dislike. Her instinct told her now why it was that he had several times come to the parsonage and why he proposed riding over to Ponde. The man's physical charm, great enough for some women, did not affect her in the least. She was only aware that she shrank

from him like a mouse from a cat ; that her one desire was to escape his observation as much as possible. Women differ largely in regard to those things ; some are by nature the pursuers, others the pursued, and Agnes belonged to the latter class.

About the end of January the girl returned to Ponde. It was quiet grey weather, never very cold. Some flowers were still shining here and there about the fronts of the tiny houses. The leafless trees showed glimpses of the river through the thin veil of their branches, the water grey too, like molten lead. In the open ground an occasional sheaf of leaves was shooting up through the soil ; or sometimes a bunch of snowdrops—winter's flowers, born in frost and darkness, before the breath of spring.

Mrs. Sorel was alone, Clare being away for a week in London on business connected with her new situation.

The old woman was delighted to have Agnes back. She looked at her curiously at first, noticing some change in her appearance even in the course of the last few months.

Agnes sat on a footstool beside her, telling all that had happened since they parted. She showed the little chain that Terry had given to her, and she spoke about Nellie's party, but never lifted her face as she told how he had returned from London for it. " And I looked rather nice, grannie," she said, raising her face at last, flushing a little as she spoke. " Captain Bassett told me I might say to you that I was ' the beauty of the evening ' ; it wasn't much," she added humbly, " for Nellie is so little, and none of the other girls were pretty, I think."

" Did you see Mark Bassett often ? " Mrs. Sorel inquired.

" No ; yes, once or twice. He used to come to ask how Terry was—and he came sometimes to see Aunt Caroline."

Mrs. Sorel said nothing, but she glanced keenly at the girl, who had risen and moved away. She had noticed

the trembling voice in which her question had been answered.

"Agnes," she said presently, "do you know that your father will soon be out of prison?"

Agnes paled suddenly. "Oh, grannie, will he come here?" she asked.

"Yes, at first; then he will go abroad, he says. He has a friend in America and he is going out there, if he is well enough to go."

Agnes stood beside her chair looking down at her grandmother. "Shall you be glad, grannie?" she asked in a low voice.

Mrs. Sorel shook her head. "Oh, child, I can be glad no more. Besides, there will be difficulties—it will bring back all the past. Clare must go away," she added, as if to herself.

That night in bed Agnes awoke again in the old terror of her childhood; her skin was pricking, her throat was dry, her heart beat wildly; a horror of great darkness seemed upon her; she was choking as if from some dreadful vision. At first she could not remember; then it came back to her—the figure she used to dream of as a child, approaching her, vague, but terrible, saying: "I'm your father, Agnes." At the words she had tried to scream, and awakened with a start.

It all swept over her once more with the rare terror of a dream. She lay motionless, turning hot and cold, afraid to close her eyes lest she should fall asleep and dream it again.

Then, suddenly, she remembered Terry's face—the glance of his bright, fearless eyes; it rose through the horror in her mind like the sun at morning. She summoned up courage to stretch her hand for the matches, and lit her candle. The small light threw a round spot of brightness on the roof above; it swam and wavered as the candle flickered in the draught from the open window. The rest of the room was in shadow, but the horror had been

dispelled, and she lay looking about her with a heavenly sense of returning calm.

"Do you trust me?" Terence had said. "*Do it then.*"

"I do; I will, I will!" said Agnes passionately, turning her heart to the bright thought of him.

She remembered Mrs. Woods on her knees, alone in the empty church, and the shining of her face as she rose. She remembered her quick practicality, her large hopefulness; the energy, the vivacity, of both mother and son. Thinking of them, and of the new impulses they had brought to her, she comforted herself and fell asleep.

CHAPTER XVII

CLARE had been in London for several weeks. She wrote at last saying she was coming home, and giving the date of her arrival. Her interview with an Austrian lady as to another situation had proved fruitless.

"There is nothing for it, I suppose," she wrote, "but going back to bondage in Russia, for I cannot endure to live on in the dulness of Ponde, or to share the indescribable pettiness of existence as governess in an English middle-class household, as you all seem to expect I shall do. My life *has* been stormy, but hitherto I have been at least *alive*. The sort of existence you expect me to lead at home is mental degradation. However," the letter continued, "I shall make an effort to endure two or three months longer, and then return to Russia. Can you send me some more money, as I find I haven't enough for my journey? The weather here has been so bad that walking has been impossible, and my expenses have been increased by frequent cabs. I shall come on Thursday by the train about six. Tell Agnes to come to meet me, for it is so awkward to have no one at the station, and I have many parcels. Be sure to send a rug in the carriage and a cushion, for those roads shake one to pieces."

Mrs. Sorel read the letter aloud slowly, pausing every now and then in an expressive way.

"Aunt Clare is never contented," said Agnes.

"Never was and never will be!" said the old woman

with a sigh. "The leopard cannot change his spots, child."

The day when her aunt was expected Agnes crossed the ferry in the afternoon, and drove in the old fly the three steep miles to the station. But when the train came in Clare was not there. Agnes decided to wait for the next train, and went into the office, where there was a fire. The night was dry, but with a good deal of wind, and very dark. She sat by the fire for nearly two hours, talking now and again with the station-master, who came out and in. At last, when the train came up, she went and stood on the platform—the only person there except the porter. Only three passengers got out—two men and one woman, the wife of a neighbouring farmer, but Clare had not arrived. Tired and disappointed, Agnes was turning away, when she saw that one of the men was Mark Bassett. Seeing who it was she slipped hurriedly out of the light by the door of the station, and she climbed into the fly, hoping that he had not observed her on the platform.

But when she dismounted at last on the landing-stage by the ferry, she found him just alighting from another carriage which had passed them on the way. Agnes stood balancing herself against the low wall. The flickering light from the lantern at the end of the pier swam every now and then across her slim figure, swayed by the uproarious night wind that came careering across the hills beyond the river. She held on her hat with one hand and grasped the edge of the low wall with the other. Mark Bassett looked at her, acknowledging the interest of face and figure. They stood together, talking from time to time, until the ferry-boat came up to the pier. Then Mark jumped in and held up his hand to her.

"Here now, let me help you in. You won't feel the wind so much when you are in the boat," he called out.

Agnes came forward, but by an imperceptible move-

ment avoided his outstretched hand. As she stepped into the boat, it gave a sudden lurch that nearly threw her off her balance, and she had to catch at his arm with both her hands for a moment to steady herself. The little fluttering hand on his sleeve, and the weight of her slight figure thrown against him for an instant, gave the man a curious thrill.

"She's the sweetest thing!" he said to himself. "And she looks like a princess in disguise—worth having, I believe, even with poor Austin Sorel behind her."

He wrapped the girl up and seated himself beside her in the stern of the heavy, flat-bottomed boat. The river was pretty rough, and the boat rolled a good deal in spite of its size and weight. A lantern placed on the seat opposite threw a band of light across the darkness that surrounded them, touching Mark's strong hands folded round his knee, and falling across his breast. Now and then, as the boat swung, the light revealed his face with curious vividness, showing the very lines on his brow, and shining on the edges of his crisp hair. From time to time he spoke with the boatmen; then he turned and began to speak to Agnes in a low tone which they could not hear.

"You've come down by the eight train, I suppose?"

"No," said Agnes. "I was waiting for my Aunt Clare. We expected her at six, but she didn't come, and so I waited for the next train; but she must have been delayed in town."

Captain Bassett said "Oh," in the tone Agnes observed most people to use about Clare; then he added, "You have been waiting hours alone in the dark by yourself. It's not right. You need some one to take care of you, Agnes."

"I have my grandmother."

"Yes, you have; but she is very old, and your Aunt Clare is not a fit person to take care of you."

"No," said Agnes. Then, moving a little nearer

to him, she said: "Captain Bassett, you knew my father?"

"Yes, yes; of course I knew him."

"Before——?"

"Yes, before that, poor fellow."

"Will you tell me what happened then?" said Agnes.

"Good Lord, child, do you not know?"

"No, I have never heard about it. I want to hear now. I *must* know now. I can't ask grannie. I don't believe my Aunt Clare; she—she extenuates so."

Mark laughed shortly. "She does," he said.

"I have heard the servants talk when I was a child," said Agnes. "Grannie told me something, but now I want to know the whole thing from the beginning. Will you tell me?"

"Upon my word," he said, "it's rather a hard thing you ask."

"Please—I do ask it. Will you tell me straight?"

"When?"

"Oh, to-night."

"Here, just now? I can't." He thought for a minute, and then said, "I will walk home with you, and I'll tell you then. Will a servant meet you?"

"I don't think so. Grannie would think I was coming with Aunt Clare."

The boatmen drew in the oars, and the boat ground against the landing-stage. The broad light from the inn door streamed out cheerfully across the road. The wind was scarcely felt down here beneath the hill. There were lighted windows in the old houses by the quay and open doors. People moved about, the smell of salt water and seaweed came up from the uncovered rocks; a lantern hanging high up from the end of a pole cast a wavering reflection into the water below. Captain Bassett paid the boatmen and jumped ashore, turning to help Agnes out. This time she allowed him to take her hand. His servant was waiting with his horses by the inn door. He told

him he would return in half an hour, and walked on with Agnes up the street.

Under the high woods the wind was vexing no more, and the road was very quiet; a few lights from the cottage windows came streaming through the garlands of creeping plants that hung around them. Sometimes, when a door was open, you saw into one of the miniature rooms with its flagged floor and its burning lamp. A cart, with a panting horse still smoking and trembling from the descent of the precipitous road, was drawn up close to the wall on one side, and the driver leant by the doorway, talking to the women within.

Agnes and Captain Bassett walked slowly up the hill and round the first corner. Mark could not see the girl's face, so he talked on about indifferent things, hoping that she had forgotten her request.

But as soon as they had passed the houses Agnes began, in a clear, steady voice that had something child-like in the sound of it, "Please tell me that story now."

"Do you really want to know?" he said, stopping his walk and standing still beside her.

"Yes, I do. I want to know it all—everything."

"You know already why your father was imprisoned?"

"Yes; grannie told me that he killed a man. That is all I have ever heard about it."

"And quite enough! Why do you ask me to tell you what your grandmother has thought fit to conceal?"

"Because I am not a child any longer. I feel as if I were walking with bandaged eyes. I can't do anything with my life until I know the whole truth."

"Why ask *me*?" he repeated almost angrily.

"Because I cannot ask my own people. It hurts grannie too much. I don't believe anything my Aunt Clare says, quite. My Uncle Timothy and Aunt Caroline hate the Sorels and *never* speak about them; and I cannot ask a servant, can I?"

"Well, but it involves other people," he said, walking slowly on again.

"My Aunt Clare?" said the girl, turning to him suddenly.

Mark pretended to be busy lighting a cigarette. The flame of the match made scarlet the hollow of his hand, and she saw in the brief flare-up how he was frowning with annoyance.

"It will not surprise me," said Agnes. "Again I ask you to tell me all you know."

He gave his shoulders a shake, threw the cigarette into a ditch, and began to speak low and rapidly.

"Very well, then. Your father and I at one time were great friends. He was older than I was, of course, but we were at the same college at Oxford. I used to spend much time at Rascath—your grandfather's house; a pretty place it was. Your mother was a distant relative of mine, you know, and we all knew each other very well. You're very like your mother," he said, and paused.

"Go on, please," said Agnes.

"Oh, well, your Aunt Clare was young then—about the age you are now (that was twenty years ago). She was very good-looking, and very wild, you know."

He stopped and gulped, and Agnes said again, "Go on, please."

"Well, there was a man we all knew—Jack Fox Conway. He was a married man, you understand. He behaved badly, and he got mixed up in a story with your Aunt Clare."

"I don't quite understand," said Agnes in a low voice.

"Hang it all, what can I say? How can I tell you this about your own aunt? It's not a story for a girl to hear!"

"Tell me the truth, please," said Agnes again, and something in the steady voice made the man obey her.

"Well, I will. This man behaved like a scoundrel.

Clare was very young, of course. She got into trouble *badly*”—he stopped and looked down at the girl in the darkness. “Are you too much of a child to know what that means, or do you understand what I’m talking about ? She came home. She had lost her reputation. People were talking about it, and there was a regular scandal. When she got back, your father made her tell him who the man was. I believe till she told him he never suspected, and he was mad with rage. He hadn’t been very long married then. Two days afterwards he took a gun and went out to shoot by himself. He met Fox Conway in a lane. No one knows what happened, but anyway, he shot him dead, and I believe your Aunt Clare had made an appointment to meet the man. She came up and saw it. Well, is that enough ? ”

“Go on to the end, please,” said Agnes.

“Oh, then things happened you’ve no need to know of. Your father was sent to prison. Then you were born, and your mother died, poor girl ! ”

“Then Aunt Clare went away ? ”

“Yes, she went abroad, and no one saw or heard of her for some years. Oh, child, don’t cry ! ” He turned and took her little cold hand in his, and drew her near him. All that was best in the man came to the surface, stirred as he had been by telling the story. He was very grave and gentle, and Agnes did not resent the action. She leaned against him for a moment in the darkness—a little, unbefriended, helpless thing, clinging to the arm held out to her. Then she swallowed down her tears and held out her hand to him as she drew herself away.

“Good-night,” she said. “Thank you very much for telling me all this. I am afraid it was very disagreeable to you.”

“Very,” he said ; then kissed the little cold hand and let it fall, saying, “Go in, and go to bed and sleep and forget all that now, It’s an old story, and no blame of

yours. No one thinks any differently of you because of it, Agnes."

He waited until he saw her disappear into the house, and then turned down the dark road, saying to himself, "Poor little girl, poor little woman! She took it very bravely, too. She's like her mother."

CHAPTER XVIII

CLARE arrived two days later, after having sent a casual telegram explaining that she "had been delayed." The delay turned out to be a ticket for the theatre, which some one had given her at the last moment. She made no apologies—only grumbled that Agnes had not again come to meet her.

She flung herself into a chair as soon as she arrived and called out to Agnes to come and unlace her boots. In this attitude she recited a few of her grievances, as the girl knelt before her with her face hidden. It had given Agnes a sort of shudder to receive her aunt's perfunctory kiss a few minutes before, for the story she had heard from Captain Bassett kept pounding through her head whenever she looked at Clare.

"Agnes is looking wretched," had been Clare's first remark. "No one would call you pretty for a moment who saw you looking like that, Agnes," she went on. "It's the dull life here. It does harm to every one. I'm sure I should be ill if I lived much longer here. It will be better to do anything to get away. Tell Betty to open my boxes, and to bring me some hot water, and shut that window. I do think you might have come to meet me, when you knew I was coming. My arm is nearly broken with holding all those heavy parcels. It was just like a farmer's wife, to lug them across the station by myself."

"There are worse things than farmers' wives—very

respectable women they are!" said Mrs. Sorel, and Clare rose and banged out of the room.

Her bell rang violently a minute after.

"Tell Betty to come and unstrap my box—stooping always tires me so," she said. "Oh, it's you, Agnes. Come and do it for me, like a good girl. What's been the matter with you?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Agnes, removing the straps and proceeding to open the trunk.

Clare went on talking to her as she began to empty out the crushed finery from the tray of the box.

"There, put that in the upper drawer. Mother should let you go about more than she does. It would do you a world of good. No girl of ~~your~~ age ought to be so shy and ridiculous as you are. Has Captain Bassett been here again?"

"No. I saw him at the ferry the other night, and he walked back with me, but he did not come in."

"He wouldn't be likely to when I was away from home," said Clare. "Don't you like him?" she inquired sharply, looking up.

"I don't think I do—much," said Agnes, hesitating.

"You little brat!" said Clare angrily. "What's the matter with him, pray?" She was on her knees now amongst the gaudy rubbish unearthed from her trunk. "He's the only decent man you've ever spoken to in all your ridiculous little life, ~~and~~ yet you say you don't like him. Why not, pray?"

"He doesn't please me—and he's quite old," said Agnes desperately.

"Old! He's only about forty-four. He's not old at all. And why shouldn't he please you? I never heard such nonsense. What business have you to say that, when many other women—people who wouldn't look at you if you were standing there in front of them—consider him charming?"

Agnes said nothing at all. She stood slowly rolling

up a ribbon, staring down at it in silence. Only once she lifted those black eyes which Clare saw had power to draw sympathy from others, and a faint smile crossed her lips.

"Captain Bassett is downstairs, miss," said Betty, opening the door at this moment.

Clare started to her feet, and seized a bodice from the bed.

"Hand me that orange ribbon, Agnes, and fasten this, will you? Will my hair do? Get out my other shoes—no, the ones with the flaps." She began arranging her hair and dabbing her face with powder, fastened on the orange ribbon, sprinkled herself with scent, seized another handkerchief, and trailed downstairs.

Captain Bassett was sitting talking very earnestly to Mrs. Sorel. The conversation ceased abruptly when Clare came in, and she could not form an idea of what they had been talking about.

After a little Mark said something about Agnes, and asked if she were at home.

"She is very shy," said Clare. "She does not like to see strangers. No wonder, living in a hole like this."

"But I am not a stranger," he said, laughing.

Clare lowered her voice. "She doesn't like you, you know," she said, as if partly in jest.

"I'm sorry, but not surprised," he said lightly, and very soon afterwards went away, without having seen Agnes at all. She, watching from her little window, saw him go, and drew a breath of relief. She hardly knew herself why he frightened her so much.

Mrs. Sorel was unusually affectionate to her that evening, and several times when Agnes looked up she found her grandmother's eyes fixed upon her with a strange, softened expression that she could not read.

Clare was in a better humour, and once more commented upon Captain Bassett's good looks.

"He ought to marry again," she said. "I suppose it

is some feeling about that tiresome child of his that prevents it."

"Is she a tiresome child?" asked Mrs. Sorel.

"Do you mean Nellie?" said Agnes. "Why, she's a *darling*——" She stopped short, and her cheeks flushed all of a sudden. Mrs. Sorel looked at her.

"All children are tiresome," was Clare's comprehensive comment. "Perhaps she's no worse than the rest of them."

Only a few days had passed when Mark Bassett came again. This time he arrived at an hour when Mrs. Sorel usually rested in her own room, and when Clare was out. Agnes heard his voice at the door and her heart sank. She hoped that he might go away, but when Betty came to say that he wanted to see her, she had to go downstairs. She had just come in from a long walk in the cool winter air, and was wearing an odd little fur toque—another of Clare's second-hand Russian garments—which suited her strangely well. Her cheeks were flushed like a pale carnation. She looked almost beautiful, and very distinguished as she came into the room, still holding her shabby gloves in her hand. For all her paleness, and her thin, childish figure, she possessed that curious touch of something which is badly named style—which no cunning of the dressmaker, and no richness of clothing, can impart to a woman who has not got it by nature. This was a charm, particularly appealing to Mark Bassett, and when it was combined with her childlike manner and the sadness of her black eyes, it had made him very much in love. He had struggled hard against the feeling at first, laughing at himself for thinking such a thing possible, considering the unfortunate connection such a marriage would be for him, how young the girl was—young enough to be his daughter—how different this idea was from any marriage he had thought of making, how he had admired her mother long ago. He called himself a fool. He had gone away from the district, and now he had come back worse than

ever. He tried to distract himself with sport or business, but he was haunted by the thought of Agnes, and the evening when he had last seen her had decided the matter.

It was therefore with something of the sportsman's feeling when at last he comes up to his quarry, that he saw the girl enter the room alone.

"I have told Betty to tell my grandmother that you are here," she said. "She will come down in a few minutes."

"Thank you. A few minutes to see you alone was all I wanted," he answered.

She went and sat down on a little sofa that had a work-basket and a heap of newspapers at the other end of it.

"May I move these?" said he, gathering them up and sitting down beside her.

Agnes shrank involuntarily a little further back into her corner. The action was sufficient to rouse his excitement. He looked at her hard, trying to make her raise her eyes; then said quietly:

"Agnes, why won't you have anything to say to me nowadays? Did I offend you the other night? You would not even come down to see me when I was here on Friday."

"I was busy."

"Are you angry with me?"

"No," said Agnes faintly.

He smiled, and then got up and stood looking down at her. Agnes pulled out the fingers of her gloves and kept silence.

"Look here, child," he said quite kindly and softly, so that she raised her eyes to his face, grateful for the change of tone, "do you think I come here to see your grandmother or your aunt?"

"I *wish* you did," said Agnes, with a sincerity that hurt him more than she knew; yet a sense of humour made him laugh outright for a moment. Oh, she was a sweet

thing, he thought again, as he sat down beside her and laid his hand on hers. Agnes withdrew her hand and looked round at him.

"I don't come here to see them, as I think you might know, and I want you to marry me. Do you hate me too much for that?" he asked, smiling again—she looked so startled and so pretty.

"Not *hate* exactly," said Agnes, with the same biting sincerity.

"Oh!" He winced perceptibly. "Could you never care for me more than that?"

"But I don't care at all," said Agnes. The words fell from her in her gentle, joyless manner—almost unbelievable to a man of his type.

"Is there—*can* there—be any one else?" he began. He looked up at her, not expecting a reply. For who else could there be? Who else had she ever seen? He would not compare himself with the neighbouring farmers or the curate of the parish. But all of a sudden the pale face opposite to him lit up as if by some exquisite inner vision.

"Oh, yes!" said Agnes, with a depth of emphasis that startled him. Her lips parted, her eyes for a moment were radiant. She drew herself up and looked out of the open window beside her, so that Mark Bassett himself wheeled about, half expecting to see some one looking in. There was nothing but the soft winter sky and the delicate tangle of the leafless orchards without.

"The deuce take it all!" he exclaimed, and springing to his feet he walked to the other end of the room, trying to hide his mortification. When Mrs. Sorel came in he stayed only for a short time, talking in a disjointed fashion very unlike his usual manner. Agnes felt thankful when he took his leave. She was very silent all that evening, and Clare asked what was wrong.

"Nothing," she said; "I'm tired."

"It's silly of a girl like you to be always speaking about

being tired," Clare retorted. Her mother had asked her to do some small piece of mending for her, and she was sitting sewing with the air of a martyr. She had been very ill pleased when she came in to find that Captain Bassett had come and gone during her absence.

"Did he know I was out?" she asked sharply, when Agnes told her.

"I don't know. I said you had gone out."

"Perhaps he thought I would come in before he left," said Clare. "I suppose he only stayed for a little?"

"He stayed about half an hour," said Agnes.

"How silly!" said Clare. "Of course, he must have come to see me."

Agnes said nothing, and she went and bid her grandmother good-night. When she got up to her own room, she leant her head on her hands, and allowed herself to recall the whole scene with Mark Bassett. It had excited and frightened her. She felt she could not tell her grandmother anything about it, for she knew now what her wish would be, and she knew how strong her will was when once she had made up her mind.

"He will go away; and then perhaps when Aunt Clare has gone too, and the whole thing is over, I may tell her."

As far as the man himself was concerned it is difficult to exaggerate the indifference with which she regarded him. It surprised and annoyed her that he should be in love with her at all. She had shrunk in terror from his ardent eyes, and her one wish was not to see him again "for a very long time," if possible.

There is no defence of the heart like preoccupation. She looked out of the casement into the windless winter night. Through a gap in the bare, matted branches of the trees, on the other side of the roadway, she could see a glimpse of the broad river below, dim and silvery, and, lying on it, the bulk of a big ship, blazing with lights, much brighter than the stars above. But Agnes kept looking at the slender new moon that was rising in the

dark sky, thinking not at all of Mark Bassett or his admiration, only saying to herself, "The same moon is over Washington too!"

She did not know that Captain Bassett, as he rode homewards, had suddenly exclaimed :

"Can it be the little American?" And then, mentally reviewing his own attractions, which certainly were neither few nor small, he had dismissed the idea as ridiculous.

These attractions were nothing to the girl. Had he and Terence been placed side by side she could scarcely have believed it possible that any one could prefer Mark Bassett. He, and the future he could offer, were nothing to her : they were not what she wanted. As well display the beauties of a foreign town to an exile sick for the bare hills of home.

She took her young love out from its hiding-place in her heart, and reviewed it like a treasure that was too beautiful to be looked at by daylight, or in the bustle of the household. Only when she was alone at night in the soft darkness, or early in the morning before the noises of the day began, she would turn on her pillow and watch the growing light and hug her precious thought. It roused in her all the exquisite aspiration—the eagerness to be worthy, that only youth can know. It was a renovation of spirit that penetrated every action of her day. She lay down at night resting her faith upon Terence ; she dressed herself each morning, putting on her shabby clothes with a new care, as if to meet the bridegroom of her soul. In her very thoughts she rejected the unworthy, and struck out for the highest because of him. Even though she never set eyes on him again, she knew that she had entered on a kingdom unknown to her before.

CHAPTER XIX

THE spring came on quickly in those parts, without the hesitations that mark her coming in the north—days when her fragrance is suddenly shut away, and only winter breathes again upon the disappointed land. Here the heat outran her coming, and while the woods were scarcely budding, the air was warm. The plum-orchards blossomed white all over the hillsides ; the flowers came up through the mould—the strong-smelling, delicious flowers of early spring ; the creepers about the cottage windows began to bud. The ground was covered, acres at a time, with wild hyacinths and primroses ; the chambers of the woods were sweet with them ; they scented the very lanes. All the craft upon the silver river seemed to move more swiftly ; the cottages were freshly whitewashed, the gates repainted, the tiny windows burnished, and the whole village awakened to a new life.

Agnes came out one morning, feeling happy, like all young things, on such an April day. She had put on a new spring gown, and though she was not vain, she felt fresh and pleased because she could not help seeing how pretty she had looked in the glass. Now that some months had elapsed since her last interview with Captain Bassett, she had escaped from her immediate terror, and began shyly to take a kind of timid pleasure in recalling some of his words. After all, he would not see her again for a long time, and he had asked her to marry him, and she had had a lover like other people—like girls in books. Perhaps it was rather interesting after all. Perhaps the



THE SPRING CAME EARLY IN THOSE PARTS

world was not such a bad place ; she *did* look nice. She had had a letter from Terence Woods—quite a short note, and not particularly well expressed ; but he said they would be coming to Europe soon. She had heard from Nellie Bassett also, who entreated her to come and stay with them.

“ Just as if I were like other people ! ” thought Agnes.

Nellie mentioned that her father had been away, but had now come home.

“ *He is very cross,* ” was Nellie’s simple comment, which—he being at a safe distance, and her distress, as I have said, somewhat softened—made Agnes smile.

Love and its affairs are by no means the only interests in life. “ The Astronomer with his Telescope, ” whom writers of the last century seemed to reverence, and who was invoked so frequently in their grand descriptions, has doubtless a higher pursuit and loftier subjects of thought. There are, indeed, a thousand and one other things to think about in this bright and crowded world, but nothing else quite takes the place of this : nothing else makes even the old look back from their place of attainment with the same sympathy. It is the tale that always finds a listener.

Agnes, then, half smiling over her own thoughts, and looking almost as if she had her rightful part in the happy morning, came walking along the steep little lane. The school children had just rushed out in the interval for play. A tiny school—every one of its scholars were known to her by name. She watched them run off chasing each other, or gather into eager knots of two or three, smearing their slates and chattering. Just in front of her walked a diseased, malformed little boy—the son of a woman who lived near their own house. He was dragging one twisted leg slowly after the other, and working his way painfully along, munching his dinner of sour bread spread with glutinous shop jam. Agnes gave him a penny sometimes when she met him, and to-day, having one in

her pocket, she stooped down and put it into his hand with a smile. As she walked slowly on she heard him consulting with another child about the quantity of sweets it would purchase. Then came a question she did not hear, and the little boy's shrill reply :

"He's in Dartmoor Jail for murder, and my mother says as 'e'll soon be out. *I'm afeared in my bed!*"

Agnes waited to hear no more. She caught up her light skirts in one hand, and hurried on wildly up the lane, through the first open gate she came to,—pushing aside the low-drooping, blossom-laden branches of the plum-trees that scattered their petals white upon her as she went; crushing down the strong young daffodils growing in the green grass; catching her hat on the low branches till her hair was all pulled awry,—scarcely conscious of where she was going, only anxious to get out of earshot of the children's shrill voices that seemed to pursue her from the lane. She struggled down the long orchard till she reached the gate at the foot of the hill, and came out upon the edge of ground that met the shore. The plum-trees stopped by the low grey wall, and oak-trees took their place, growing so close to the river that some of them were stepping in, and long trails of ivy hung down from the banks, dipping into the water. Agnes came and sat on a stone by the edge. There were no ships in sight—only a boat, with a fisherman rowing quietly out to the middle of the stream. She sat still for a long time, sometimes looking up into the serene April sky, sometimes across at the distant fields on the other side, where the crimson earth was glowing in the sun. Her eyes met beauty everywhere, while her heart was uncomforted. She wanted help and she could not find it. At last she looked along the line of white blossoming trees, and saw the square tower of the church rising above them. She remembered how she had seen Mrs. Woods on her knees in the church at Little Widger, and the shining of her face as she rose. She would go there,



THE SQUARE TOWER OF THE CHURCH

and see if that would help her. The church stood at the top of a meadow which sloped up from the water's edge, and was covered with yellow buttercups and full of daisies. As she climbed up the field, the larks were singing in the high sky above her. The stir and warmth of the April morning made her feel all the more miserable. She reached the churchyard—an ill-kept little spot, with grass long and neglected—full of flowers now. She pushed the church door open and went in. It was cold in spite of the sunshine, and smelt very damp. She crouched down in one of the empty pews and her heart stirred vaguely, seeking for some help. But the empty building had nothing to say to her. She propped her chin on her hand, and gazed before her, always hearing the children's words, "*'E's coming 'ome—I'm afeared in my bed!*" They had made her realise with a terrible distinctness how she felt about her father's return, and there was no escape. She had never seen him, but somehow a sinister image had grown up in her fancy, and as she thought of his home-coming, she was seized with an inexpressible dread. What would happen? What would they say? What would become of Clare? Could she and he meet again after all that had passed? How would her grandmother bear it all? she wondered. When would he come?—the time must be getting near.

She thought about other girls—her companions—and how fortunate they were. She remembered Mr. Briggs—Maria Courteney's father—a fat, vulgar man, with a loud laugh. What would she not have given to have a father like him! Or even Betty Martyn's, who was a harsh-voiced martinet; or how happy Nellie Bassett was—her father was so kind!

Her eyes fell on the old tomb at the corner of the church; just the outline of a knight's figure, lying stiffly with his shield at his toes, the face all blurred by time, nothing remarkable in the workmanship. It brought Terence and

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CHAPTER XX

ONE day, shortly after Clare had returned from London, Agnes had gone out for a long walk by herself. As she approached the house on her way back, she heard the sound of voices, and saw a stout, elderly man, who looked much overheated from climbing the hill, with a girl beside him, whom she presently recognised as Maria Courteney Briggs.

Maria Briggs it was, much grown-up, dressed now quite like a young lady, with a profusion of skirt ; and no doubt at all about her hair being up, for it was piled high upon her head.

"I think that this is the house," she was saying. Then, catching sight of Agnes, she exclaimed, "Oh, here she is, father ! Well, Agnes, how do you do ? We've come to see you, as we were in the village."

She held up her fat face, and kissed Agnes warmly ; and Mr. Briggs, who had seen her before, when she was at school, pretended to be amazed at the change in her appearance. Indeed, he was surprised to see the lank, pale little girl he remembered looking so pretty.

Agnes took them into the house, and, leaving Mr. Briggs to talk to her grandmother, took Maria up to her own room.

When Miss Briggs had arranged her hair a little, and set her hat at a more becoming angle, she sat down on the bed beside Agnes, and suddenly, making a great effort, as was evident from the way she pursed up her

button mouth, whilst the colour rose in her fat cheeks, began to reveal the object of her visit.

"You know, Agnes," she said, "that when you wrote to me after Christmas"—Agnes nodded—"you said your grandmother told you you would need to earn your own living. What are you going to do? I have an aunt who wants some one to live with her. She's one of those people always ill, but just never dead, you know. She's not got a temper or anything, but only symptoms. I wondered if you would think of that?"

"It's very kind of you, Maria," said Agnes. "I have to stay at home just now, but I will let you know if I am going to try to get something to do, and you can tell me more about it."

"It would be dull enough," said Maria, "only better than going amongst strangers." She did not wait for Agnes to reply, but hurried on: "I came to-day, because I had heard"—she paused for a second, going on quickly—"about your father, and I understood lots of things then, and I just wanted to come and see you, and show you I was a true friend." She got out this little speech with difficulty, without her usual grand manner, and at the end of it she caught hold of Agnes' hands and squeezed them hard.

"Oh, Maria," said Agnes, suddenly touched by the girl's kind feeling, "how good of you! How kind you are! I'm glad some one knows!" she exclaimed, laying her head on Maria's arm, and bursting into tears. "You can never imagine what it was to have that hanging over me at school, amongst all of you, when you were all happy except me. Oh, I'm so glad you know now!"

"It doesn't make a bit of difference," said Maria warmly. "None of the others know, not Nellie or Elma, and I shan't tell them."

"It makes a difference to every one," faltered Agnes.

"Of course," began Miss Briggs, speaking more in her usual lofty tone, as her moment of emotion passed, "mis-

fortunes *will* happen in the best-regulated families, as Matthew Arnold says. But mother always says *much may be done to ignore them*—with your looks, Agnes."

"My looks!" said Agnes, astonished. She had raised her head and dried her eyes now.

"Yes," said Miss Briggs, eyeing her. Then, as she noticed Agnes' ruffled hair, she slipped off the edge of the bed; and again, as if drawn by an irresistible impulse, moved towards the mirror, where she paused to arrange her own front locks once more. "Yes, Agnes," she went on, carefully skewering her hat with its long pin, and giving a final pat to her hair, "that night at Nellie Bassett's dance, every one said you were the prettiest girl in the room."

"Oh, did they? Well, I'm very glad," said Agnes, blushing a little with pleasure.

"Mother would like you to come and stay with us, and go a little into society now," continued Maria. "I'm not 'coming out' regularly till autumn; but we've been entertaining a good deal, and of course, now I've got my hair up, I am allowed to go almost where I like."

"It's very kind of your mother, Maria," said Agnes. "But I'm afraid I can't leave grannie just now, even if she would have allowed me to go, my father is coming home——"

"Oh," said Maria; her grand manner failed her again, and she squeezed Agnes once more by the hand, saying, "It's *dreadful*!"

"Come downstairs now, and see my grandmother," said Agnes, and they went down together.

"You must remember," said Maria, pausing at the door, "that if I can do *anything* for you, Agnes, I'll do it." There was so much kind resolution in her fat face, that Agnes felt she could never laugh at her again.

They found in the drawing-room Clare sitting talking, and the astonished Mr. Briggs, hotter than ever, very upright and uncomfortable, trying to answer her remarks.

"*Butter!*" Clare remarked, when Agnes came back, after having gone down to the gate with her friends. "It must be butter or cheese to make a man look like that! And what an absurd, hideous little bundle of a girl!"

"Maria is very kind; I'm fond of her," said Agnes.

"Well, if that's a specimen of the friends you make at school, I should think you might as well have stayed at home," Clare retorted.

"They seem good, kind people," said Mrs. Sorel.

"Kind!" said Clare indignantly. "Why should they be kind? Who is wanting kindness? And good! Fat, oily men of that sort are all Pharisees and Nonconformists, and he's probably a Libertine in the background!"

"We all wear a different coat to the world, more or less, if all were known," remarked Mrs. Sorel dryly.

Agnes had been listening to this outburst against the harmless Mr. Briggs with astonishment.

Clare now turned on her. "Horrid little man!" she began. "He went on in such an absurd way, saying that you had been so much admired at the Bassetts' dance. I wonder Mark Bassett allows his child to have a companion like that Briggs girl! I suppose the old thing wanted us to call *his* daughter pretty!"

Agnes turned away without saying anything. She understood now why her aunt was angry with Mr. Briggs.

By the evening, however, Clare had recovered her temper. She had received a letter which pleased her, and settled the date of her return to Russia. Although grumbling constantly about her "degrading position," and so on, in reality she was looking forward with eagerness to getting back to more congenial surroundings.

She read the letter aloud, and at once began to anticipate the amusement she would have when she joined her employers in Paris, before going back to Russia. She talked and ate a great deal, and drank two glasses of claret; and after dinner brought down a huge box of highly coloured

world was not such a bad place ; she *did* look nice. She had had a letter from Terence Woods—quite a short note, and not particularly well expressed ; but he said they would be coming to Europe soon. She had heard from Nellie Bassett also, who entreated her to come and stay with them.

“ Just as if I were like other people ! ” thought Agnes.

Nellie mentioned that her father had been away, but had now come home.

“ *He is very cross,* ” was Nellie’s simple comment, which—he being at a safe distance, and her distress, as I have said, somewhat softened—made Agnes smile.

Love and its affairs are by no means the only interests in life. “ The Astronomer with his Telescope, ” whom writers of the last century seemed to reverence, and who was invoked so frequently in their grand descriptions, has doubtless a higher pursuit and loftier subjects of thought. There are, indeed, a thousand and one other things to think about in this bright and crowded world, but nothing else quite takes the place of this : nothing else makes even the old look back from their place of attainment with the same sympathy. It is the tale that always finds a listener.

Agnes, then, half smiling over her own thoughts, and looking almost as if she had her rightful part in the happy morning, came walking along the steep little lane. The school children had just rushed out in the interval for play. A tiny school—every one of its scholars were known to her by name. She watched them run off chasing each other, or gather into eager knots of two or three, smearing their slates and chattering. Just in front of her walked a diseased, malformed little boy—the son of a woman who lived near their own house. He was dragging one twisted leg slowly after the other, and working his way painfully along, munching his dinner of sour bread spread with glutinous shop jam. Agnes gave him a penny sometimes when she met him, and to-day, having one in

CHAPTER XXI

CLARE had ceased talking at last, and begun to read one of her yellow-covered novels. The little room was very still. The windows were open, but the candles on the table scarcely flickered in the faint draught.

"Who's coming at this hour of night?" said Clare suddenly. "Hasn't the postman been long ago?"

Agnes lifted her head to listen. She heard a heavy, slow footstep coming up the flagged pathway. It stopped, as if the man had paused to glance up at the windows; then came on again, and there was a low knock at the door.

"It can't be that tiresome Mr. Ingraham at this time, surely?" said Clare, shuffling into the corner of the sofa, and touching her hair.

Agnes looked across at her grandmother. A man's voice was audible down below, asking for Mrs. Sorel. The old woman turned round and faced the door, resting one hand on the writing-table beside her; her clay-pale face seemed struck into relief with black shadows, her eyes were dreadful to see.

The slow step was ascending the stair. Betty had opened the door, and a tall man, with a closely shaven head, was standing on the threshold.

It seemed to the girl as if her heart turned round inside her body. She could not move or speak. The man in the doorway made a step forward. He was dressed in plain dark clothes, and carried a little cloth cap, crumpled between

his rough hands. His shoulders were hunched up, and his step was slow and trailing.

"Well, mother!" he said in a low, constrained voice.

Mrs. Sorel rose, forgetting to lean upon her cane, as usual, and took one heavy, limping step to meet him. She raised her arms as if to embrace him, but he had only time to catch hold of her, when she sank back, overpowered with sudden faintness.

Agnes jumped up, and between them they placed her in a chair. Her face was very cold and white, and her lips were blue. She gasped for a moment, and then said:

"It's nothing; it will pass. I did not expect you to come to-night, Austin."

"No?" he said, holding her hand in one of his, and clumsily stroking it. He did not lift his eyes for a moment, but looked steadily on the ground, until there was a movement from the sofa, and Clare stood up. Her face, too, was pale, but one cheek began to burn fiercely red. She looked at her brother, saying, "Don't you know me, Austin?"

Then he glanced up, and turned his head, so that the light fell sharply on him. Agnes saw his face. He lifted his lip in a kind of grin that had no mirth in it, as he answered, "Oh, yes, I know you, Clare!" He stood, as it were, considering; then, still holding his mother's hand, and lifting his lip in the same ugly way, said slowly, "So well *and fat*, Clare!"

"Well!" she cried, sitting plump down on the sofa, so that the box of sugar-plums fell and scattered on the carpet. "You seem to grudge it to me! You all do—no one wishes *me* any good. Haven't I slaved for years in a degrading drudgery, that any servant would be ashamed to undertake, my own mother urging me to it? Haven't I suffered every indignity, amongst strangers with hearts of iron, whose abominable children torment my life away?" She paused, trembling, and clutching at the sofa-cushion.

Mrs. Sorel sat forward in her chair, and passed her hand across her eyes with a sharp sigh. The man moved slowly away, and sat down by the window. He leant his elbows on the table, and stared down at his rough hands.

"You've suffered every indignity, have you?" he said slowly, drawing one hand across the back of the other, and examining the split finger-nails. "So have some other people. Mother," he said suddenly, turning to Mrs. Sorel, "is this Agnes?"

Agnes stood behind her grandmother's chair, gazing at him. All the vacant years between them: her unfathered childhood, his empty heart, the miserable meaning of it all, came over her, and she was afraid to move. She saw the likeness to her race, this strange familiarity of feature and figure in one who was a stranger to her.

The face was like her grandmother's in its structure, but it had the high, hard expression of one who has gone through some searing experience unknown to those about him. From it, all the minute, scarcely visible lines and indentations that are engraved by the thousand and one daily, hourly changes of thought and feeling, more or less pleasant, had been, as it were, altogether withdrawn, leaving something that seemed as if the eyes of an animal looked out through the mask of a man.

The girl did not know what he expected of her. She made a little trembling movement, and, as he stepped forward he set his foot on the cardboard box that contained Clare's sweetmeats, and crushed it on the floor. He stooped to pick it up, and then suddenly seized a handful of the sweets, and munched them greedily. He seemed to have forgotten all about Agnes for the moment.

Clare, uttering an exclamation of disgust, got up and left the room. Austin sat heavily down on the sofa, and looked at his mother with a timid smile.

"These taste good!" he said.

"Oh, God!" Agnes heard her grandmother sigh, and saw her large hand clench upon her knee.

The girl slipped from behind the chair, and crossed the room; then, kneeling down at her father's side, she gathered up some of the bonbons in her pretty hand.

"Have some, father," she said gently, touching his knee to attract his attention. He was staring vacantly about the room.

He turned round, and looked at her, and his face melted. "Oh, my little girl!" he said.

Agnes flung her arms about his neck. She pressed her soft face against his cheek, and clung to him and kissed him; for a moment, as he held her, she heard him draw his breath with a sob. Then he gently disengaged her arms and stood up, curiously ill at ease.

"I don't want to trouble you, mother," he began; "but can I have a room here?"

"Yes, yes, of course you can. Agnes, go and tell Betty to prepare a room for your father," said Mrs. Sorel, making a movement as if to rise from her chair; instead, she sank back again with a sigh. Austin came and stood awkwardly beside her, as Agnes went out of the room.

She went into the kitchen where the bright fire almost startled her by its look of unconcerned ordinary life. But the dinner dishes were unwashed upon the table; the younger maid was lurking in the background in a listening attitude, and old Betty, a dish-towel in her hand, and her work undone before her, was standing beside the fire. Clare stood opposite, her face now wild and red, talking in excited tones.

"It's as horrible as a dream!" she was saying. "If it weren't so late at night, I should go and sleep at the inn. Mrs. Sorel had no right to let him come suddenly back like this! No one considers me! I cannot sleep under the same roof to-night!"

"Now, now, Miss Clare, you go off to bed, and don't

be upsettin' yourself and others. Mrs. Sorel, she'll be ill to-morrow for certain," said Betty.

"She's no feeling!" said Clare bitterly. "She's the heart of a she-wolf, not of a mother!"

"Aunt Clare, you must not speak like that! You are ill and tired. Won't you go to bed now, and try to sleep?" said Agnes.

It seemed to the old servant, as she spoke, that the girl had changed from a child to a woman in a single night. For some time past the change had been coming on, but now it showed clear enough. It was as if you saw some soft metal changing beneath the quick repeated blows of the fashioner into definite form. Clare did not turn and flounce at her as she would have done a week before.

"I shouldn't sleep," she said peevishly; but she allowed the girl to take her hand, and lead her out of the kitchen. Agnes lighted her bedroom candle, helped her off with her things, gave her a hot drink that Betty brought in (which smelt of brandy, but she thought this was not the moment to object to that), then, when she saw Clare more composed, turned softly away and left her.

Glancing around the untidy room, heaped with crushed frippery, littered with paper novels and cosmetics, remembering the story that Mark Bassett had told her, Agnes went farther on that road of experience where every step, as in the fairy-tale, is taken with an anguish of pain.

She went into her grandmother's bedroom afterwards; there everything was in exquisite order always. The old woman lay with her eyes closed, but she said:

"Is that you, Nancy?" when she heard the door open.

"She's all right now, grannie; Betty and I got her to go to bed. Father"—she paused over the word—"father said he had everything he wanted"; she sat down on the edge of the bed, shading the candle with her hand. "Can I do anything for you, grannie?"

"Nothing, nothing. Go to bed, child ; try to sleep."

"Are you very tired, grannie ?" said Agnes.

Mrs. Sorel opened her eyes, and looked at her, and shook her head. "Yes, yes, but it's not that, Agnes. A sword has pierced through my own soul also !"

CHAPTER XXII

AGNES breakfasted alone with her grandmother next morning. Clare had breakfast in bed, and Austin did not appear till nearly lunch-time, when he came down and sat talking with his mother. Agnes, in her own room, hearing their voices below, wondered what they were talking about, but was afraid to intrude upon their counsel. She went to see Clare, who was lying in bed, with the remains of a large meal on the table beside her.

"Am I not looking ill?" she asked.

"No, Aunt Clare, not at all," said Agnes, removing the tray, and beginning to execute several of Clare's errands about the room.

"Well, it's surprising if I am not! People should have some consideration for the feelings of others of more delicate sensibilities than themselves; but my mother is obtuse—she has the nerves of an ox. Anything painful always makes me ill. See that my bath is hot, Agnes. And will you sew on the hooks to my green skirt—one came off last night? Draw down the blind a little more, and shut the door quietly, and perhaps I may get some sleep before luncheon."

Agnes left her, and went down at last to see her grandmother. Austin had gone, and the old woman was sitting alone by the window. She was not reading, as usual, but sat still doing nothing, and Agnes was startled by the pallor of her face.

"You are ill, grandmother," she said, kneeling down beside her. "Can't I do anything for you?"

"Nothing—nothing, Agnes. I have a headache, that is all. I did not sleep last night. How is Clare?"

"She is still in bed. She will get up in time for luncheon, she says."

"No, no, you'd better go and tell her to lie still; say I think she'd better stay in bed. Her luncheon will be sent up to her."

Agnes went upstairs. Clare was sitting half dressed on the edge of her bed, hurriedly drawing together a hole in a black stocking with white thread. She had not done her hair, which was still in curling-pins; but her face was dabbed with powder, and she already had a string of Roman pearls about her throat.

"Oh, Aunt Clare, you're getting up," said Agnes. "Grandmother sent me to say——"

"To say what?" Clare asked, biting off the thread, and turning angrily.

"That she thinks you'd better stay in bed, if you're tired. Your luncheon will be sent up at once."

"And pray, why should I stay in bed, more than any one else? I'm nearly dressed. I'll do nothing of the kind! Treating me like a naughty child; I never heard anything like it! I would need to have a good temper, I'm sure! Go away and let me finish dressing." She pushed Agnes out of the room, and banged the door.

The girl went downstairs slowly. "She won't stay in bed, grannie. She's coming down to luncheon."

"Very well, come away, Agnes," said Mrs. Sorel grimly. Agnes felt her lean heavily on her shoulder as they walked into the dining-room.

"Your father said he would be in by half-past one," she said, sinking into her chair, and covering her face with her hands.

She took one mouthful of the food that Agnes gave her; then laid down her spoon as if she could eat no more.

sort of way. I want to get away from him. I could never marry him, and I told him so, and I hope he won't come again ! ”

“ Ah, well ! Ah, dear ! Agnes, I cannot say any more to you, only just remind you again how young you are, and that every feeling changes with time. You may feel differently after a while. Remember who you are, and all that is against you. Think of what your life will be if you don't marry. It is hard for any woman to make her way in the world and earn her own living. I can leave you only very little money. What will you do then ? Look at Clare. Has she had a happy life ? ”

Agnes held up her head. “ Mine would be different. You don't want me to marry any one unless I care for him, do you, grannie ? ”

After a long silence the old woman spoke slowly : “ Yes,” she said, “ I do, Agnes. Half of what people call love in this world is nothing of the kind. True love often grows very slowly from very small beginnings, from feelings of friendship and confidence and respect. There's *nothing* perfect in life—no perfect happiness in marriage any more than in anything else. When you are old like me, and have lived a lifetime, you will see how much of unhappiness was caused by expecting too much—*no one* is perfectly happy.”

Agnes listened in silence.

“ Who was the happiest person you ever knew, grannie ? ” she asked.

“ I don't know, child ! I think perhaps your cousin Hannah.”

“ But my cousin Hannah was never married ? ”

Mrs. Sorel laughed, her dry, short laugh. “ No, she never did. Perhaps that was why ; she's a very religious woman, of course.”

Agnes turned the rings on her grandmother's hand ; *then she said*, with a little sob, for she was overstrained and

miserable : " I should like to be happy, grannie ! I want to be happy like other people."

The old woman turned away from her with a sigh.

At that moment Agnes heard her father's step in the garden ; they could both see him from the open window where they sat together. He held his shoulders high, and stooped forward, walking with a heavy, uncertain step. When he reached the little gate, he opened it, and went out ; then hearing it bang after him, he turned, hesitated, came back a step, and clumsily fastened it again. Glancing up, he saw Agnes and his mother at the window, and gave an awkward nod up at them, touching his cap as a servant might have done.

Mrs. Sorel watched him as he moved out of sight—a slouching figure with a curious gait. " And once he was a prince amongst men ! " she said, as she watched him shamble away.

The pleasant sounds of spring came in through the windows ; the old woman lay back with closed eyelids in her chair, and Agnes began to hope that she had dropped asleep, for her twitching mouth and grey pallor had alarmed the girl. Then she saw her give a quick movement of irritation, and raise her head, as Clare came noisily into the room.

" Hush, please, grannie was asleep," Agnes began in a low voice.

" How was I to know that ? " retorted Clare. She dropped into her favourite chair, and began, with a great rustling, to turn over the leaves of an illustrated paper. Mrs. Sorel looked up.

" Are you not going out, Clare ? "

" Why should I go out ? May I not sit with the rest of you if I like ? I'm sure I don't know what's the matter with all of you to-day ; none of you are fit to speak to. If the consequence of Agnes being sent to what you call a good school is only to spend money, and give her insufferable manners, I don't think much of it. No one

in this house has been decently civil to-day ; you all left the table at different moments, and Austin's eating was enough to make a pig sick ! I felt quite ill when I saw him."

" *Don't*, Aunt Clare ! " Agnes began. She had seen the expression on her grandmother's face. But it was too late. Mrs. Sorel rose to her feet, and pointed at her daughter with her cane.

" *Yes !* " she said ; her voice was thick and indistinct, and she stammered every now and then. " *You* to sit there and say that, who remember Austin, what he was, and who know what has made him what he is now ! There you are——" She paused and stuttered. " Idle—idle and discontented, and good for nothing but to care for your own body and its vanities, as you always did ! I tell you, Clare "—the words came out with difficulty—" that women like you are a curse—a curse you've been to me ever since you grew up, and will be to the last ! " She made a step forward, leaning heavily on the arm of her chair. " What has your wantonness not brought upon us all : shame to yourself, and death to the man who was fool enough to play with you, and worse than death to your brother—disgrace to all of your name, even the child here ? You broke her mother's heart, and you broke mine, and your wretched self—self—self—is all you care about still ! "

She made a sudden convulsive grasp at Agnes, who was standing by her, and the next minute fell heavily to the floor.

" Oh, Aunt Clare ! Help me ! " cried the girl, struggling to raise her up. " She's dying ! "

Clare rose slowly from her seat ; she was trembling with passion, and her red cheeks were pale for once.

" No wonder ! Spite like that would kill any one ! " she said.

Agnes heard her father's step in the hall. She sprang to the door and called to him. He came walking in quickly,

and knelt down to lift his mother up. A sudden change, like a kind of awakening, had passed over him in an instant. His step was quick and firm, and he carried her as if she had been a child. She, who had so often borne him as a baby in her arms, lay senseless and inert. He carried her into her own room, and laid her gently down upon the bed.

CHAPTER XXIII

ALL through that night Agnes and her father sat and watched together. Mrs. Sorel hardly stirred or breathed, it seemed. From time to time she would take the spoonful of stimulant they gave her. Once she opened her eyes, and looked wildly about the room; then sank again into a stupor that lasted till morning. The doctor could do nothing for her, and left the house, saying he would return early next day.

Clare had been persuaded to go to bed, for Agnes feared that her presence would agitate Mrs. Sorel if she should ever regain consciousness.

But the hours passed, and she scarcely moved. The dawn came up breathless on the river. From her seat by the bedside, Agnes could see the high fields that lay upon the other side, touched suddenly by the earliest light. It waxed and descended till all the broad water gleamed in the morning. Then the old woman stirred in bed, the eyes in the grey face slowly opened, and fixed their gaze upon the man who sat beside her. He had dropped asleep for a moment, leaning his head on his arm, one coarse hand relaxed, hanging across the table on which he leant. Agnes was afraid to awake him, lest a sound should disturb her grandmother. She bent silently forwards, and whispered, "Grannie?" The old woman's hand, lying on the outside of the coverlet, closed softly over hers, but she did not look at Agnes, only at Austin sleeping in his chair.

She gazed at him for a few seconds with a look that was neither glad nor sad, but inscrutable, as if already belonging

to another order of intelligence. Agnes could not tell whether she was conscious or not, but, as Austin awoke with a start, her face changed, and her breath failed, her mouth fell open, the eyelids flickered, and then closed for ever.

Late on in the afternoon of the same day Agnes went up alone and sat down by the bedside. She lifted the covering and looked at the face of the dead; but it told her nothing. A look of mortal weariness had settled on the features; it seemed not wonderful that one so tired would wake no more. The warm tears of youth that rained from the girl's eyes as she looked fell unheeded on the low pillow.

"She was the only help I had, and she cannot stir to help me now," said Agnes to herself, realising bitterly that the only counsellor and stay she ever had was gone.

After a little while she roused herself, and tried to think about other people. Clare was shut up in her own room, where she had spent the day. Austin was alone downstairs. Agnes found him sitting listlessly by the table, turning over the leaves of a bound volume of *Punch*. He had been smoking, and the room was stifling with the smell of coarse tobacco. He looked up at the girl as she stood beside his chair, and shutting the book, pushed it away, saying, in an apologetic manner, "I don't know what to do with myself!"

Agnes felt the strange thrill of a new affection, born partly of pity, as she looked at him. She put her hand on his shoulder, and leant against him for a moment.

"Father, won't you let me do all that grannie could have done for you now? Won't you let me become a real daughter to you?"

He turned round, and caught her soft hand between his great rough ones—but very gently, as if he were afraid to hurt it.

"It's too late, Agnes."

"Oh, don't say that, please! Let me help you, father. I have no one either, now that grannie is gone."

He gave her hand a gentle pressure, and smiled, the first time that she had seen him smile. "You're like your mother," he said.

The girl could scarcely believe that it was still only four o'clock in the day. There were so many hours still to be lived through before night! When Betty came in with tea she made her father drink some, and then began to ask him about the funeral. He knew nothing, could advise nothing, but sat with his face hidden in his hands, saying, "Yes, yes," to all that she suggested. At last Agnes fetched the key of her grandmother's writing-table, and gave it to him.

"Won't you look over these papers, father?" she said gently.

He looked at her. "I—I, Agnes?"

"Aunt Clare mustn't do it. Do it, father. It will help me," she answered; and she left him alone while she went to look after her aunt.

Clare was still in bed, in a red dressing-gown, drinking tea, and writing innumerable letters. She was much excited—her face swollen with crying. Heaps of torn-up letters were on the bed beside her; also, as Agnes could see, a French novel under the pillow.

She complained of feeling very ill, and Agnes, looking at her, felt her heart sink. This was all that she had to depend on!

But she soothed her as well as she could, darkened her room, tidied up the litter on the bed, and carried off the tea-tray to the kitchen. There everything was quiet and orderly. Betty, at any rate, was some one to lean upon, and Agnes sat down by the kitchen fire with a sigh of relief. Betty's quiet talk, full of the calm acceptance of death and its accompaniments, that is common to her

class, soothed the girl. She felt better after spending half an hour there, and went up again to sit with her father, feeling less despairing. She found herself following him with her eyes, trying to get accustomed to the new face, and every now and then noting on it some resemblance to his mother. If he asked her, in a timid, awkward way, to do any little thing for him, it gave her the keenest pleasure. Once or twice he smiled at her again, and once he patted her on the shoulder as she stood beside him. Agnes flushed with pleasure, but she was too shy to say anything about her feelings.

The two days that followed were very dark. Agnes and her father, with old Betty, alone went to the churchyard on the day of the funeral. Agnes was very tired when she got back. Clare had put on a new black dress, the trimming of which displeased her, and as the girl went wearily upstairs she called out to her :

"Do come here and help me to unpick this horrible bit of fringe. Even mourning is made worse by country dressmakers !"

Agnes stepped into the room where Clare was standing in her black skirt. She held the bodice in her hand, and was cutting off the trimming. As she looked at Clare's uncovered shoulders, fat and white, at her thick white throat, and the bold yet vacant face, heavily covered with powder, at the large, shallow-set eyes, somewhat inflamed with weeping, the girl was seized with a sudden sense of moral disgust, that made it almost impossible for her to speak. She muttered something about being very tired, and turning away, her eyes blinded with tears, she stumbled up to her own room, locked the door, and flung herself down upon her bed.

She remembered the look of profound weariness that she had seen upon her grandmother's face, before the last warmth of life had passed away. After so long a journey the traveller had sunk fainting on the very threshold of home ! Was this all, then, that life could bring to a

woman full of character, and strength, and affections, such as her grandmother had been? If she had been defeated by life—a strong woman like her—"what," thought the girl, "remains to me!"

She thought about Mark Bassett, and wondered vaguely if it would be possible for her to marry him. Had she been a few years older, she would perhaps have been able to weigh the matter more truly—in the balances of the world, at least; but with the nobility that atones for the foolishness of youth, she put aside all the practical advantages the marriage held for her, and simply turned away from the thought of it with a shudder.

She wondered what would become of her now. Her Uncle Timothy had written to say that he wanted her to come to them for the present. Her father was going to America, Clare would go abroad, the house would be sold as soon as possible; but what should she do then?

She could not stay on for ever with her old relatives. Should she write to Maria Briggs and ask about the aunt who "just wouldn't die," and wanted a young companion? That thought was not alluring.

She lay still, looking out at the patch of sky that she saw between the tree-tops from the little window. It was a quiet, grey day without sun or wind, that seemed a sort of pause in the busy spring-time. The birds were conversing in a lower tone; the stir of growth and blossom was arrested for the moment.

"Shall I pray?" thought Agnes. She slipped off the bed and knelt down. "Is it any use?" she thought. "*Even God can't help me.* Can He undo the past, or change my father and Aunt Clare? Well, He could alter my circumstances, I suppose." She prayed earnestly, with the intense impatience of her need, "Oh, send me some help *quickly*—not after a long time, but *now!*"

It was not many minutes afterwards that she heard a carriage drive up to the gate. She ran like a child to the window, with her heart beating fast, saying to herself, "Perhaps miracles do happen. It may be the answer to my prayer."

CHAPTER XXIV

BUT it was no miracle. She saw only the little, old-fashioned carriage that was so familiar to her, and it was only her Uncle Timothy who descended from it and came up the little pathway with his head bent, a curious expression of prim repugnance on his delicately lined features. Agnes hastened to dry her tear-stained face and smooth her disordered hair, and a few minutes afterwards went down into the drawing-room.

Her father was sitting opposite to Mr. Lascelles. He was looking on the ground and biting the ends of his fingers. Never had the indefinable degradation of his appearance seemed so marked as it did to the girl at that moment. Mr. Lascelles, in a very measured, careful voice, was speaking as she came into the room. She heard only the words, "face the future."

"I have no future," said Austin with a bitter laugh.

Agnes sat down by her uncle and put her hand in his.

"You are coming to us, my dear, as soon as you can, are you not?" he began, turning to her with evident relief.

"Yes—yes! She'll go to you at once. I can do nothing for her, and I am going away immediately," said her father. "I'll get myself out of the way as fast as I can, and never trouble any of you again, now that my mother is gone. You needn't be afraid."

"Ah, dear me!" sighed Mr. Lascelles. He was not a

person who tried to fill a pause, but sighed and sat in silence. Agnes felt she could not speak without beginning to cry.

Clare, in her new black dress, highly flushed, nervous and defiant, now came into the room, and matters became worse. Mr. Lascelles had very much the air of a person who found himself walking among toads. He would look at Clare every now and then, as a constrained remark passed between them, and then quickly avert his eyes, only again to look somewhere else as his glance fell on Austin.

"Your aunt," he said to Agnes, "was very sorry she was not able to come with me to-day, for she hoped you would have come back along with us——"

"*Rescued* as soon as possible!" Clare exclaimed audibly.

Mr. Lascelles winced slightly, and turned even more markedly towards Agnes.

"Your Aunt Caroline has been unwell for several days, so such a long drive was impossible for her," he went on. "But your Cousin Hannah, who is staying with us at present, came along with me. She has just gone into the rectory to see Mrs. Ingraham, and will come on here presently."

"Oh, Hannah Raleigh. I've not seen her for a hundred years!" exclaimed Clare. "She must be quite an old woman now."

"We all get older with time," said Mr. Lascelles in a tone that closed the subject.

"Hannah old! I suppose so. She had a golden voice," said Austin suddenly.

Mr. Lascelles turned to Clare, and, with a distinct effort to conquer his repugnance, asked her if she had made any plans.

"I am going back to Russia, to resume my drudgery there," she said.

"Ah!" said Mr. Lascelles. The remark was inadequate, and another long silence followed. It was interrupted

by the entrance of Hannah Raleigh. They could hear her talking to Betty as she came upstairs.

"Ah, here you are at last, Hannah!" Mr. Lascelles exclaimed in evident relief, as she entered the room.

Agnes had not seen her Cousin Hannah for many years, and had only a very indistinct picture of her amongst her childish recollections. But as she came into the room, large and bland, full of a kind of benign dignity, she remembered how her grandmother had spoken about her only a few days before her death, as being the happiest woman she knew.

She entered, panting a little from climbing the stairs—a tall woman, stout almost to fatness, yet still carrying herself with dignity and grace. Her mellow voice, and the grand, open courage of her face, were a contrast to Mr. Lascelles' pinched features and gingerly way of speaking. She swept into the room like a warm breath, dissolving the frozen silence of the little circle.

"Austin!" she said. Austin stood up at her entrance as if uncertain what to do. She came up to him, holding out her hand and looking in his face. His eyes, defiant yet imploring, met her glance for a moment, and then he looked away, his mouth working with ill-controlled emotion, but he grasped her hand and wrung it hard.

"I am so glad to see you again—once more," she said.

"You are the first person to say so, Hannah," he answered, but he smiled and looked at her with more assurance.

"And this is Agnes!" she exclaimed, folding Agnes in a deep embrace, and almost at the same moment, while she seemed to gather the girl under her wing, turning to greet Clare. In five minutes she had restored Clare to good humour, and Austin was talking quite pleasantly to Mr. Lascelles, whilst Agnes sat holding her soft warm hand, and rejoicing in the protection of her presence. Miss Raleigh's hair was grey; at her age it was not to be supposed that she had escaped many of the troubles of life:

yet, as she looked at her, Agnes thought she was like something ripened on the sunny side of the wall ; she appeared so far away from the vexations and the petty acidities marked so plainly upon the face of many an elderly woman.

At home her hands were occupied with a hundred charities, and her heart filled with a crowd of her beloved, but she had a power of throwing everything aside at the moment and turning to each newcomer with all her attractions. She at once found something encouraging to say to Clare, even remarked upon her new black dress with approval, and heard the whole story of the wrong trimmings without a smile. She spoke of her grandmother's death to Agnes, with the air of one who considered death as a privilege—volumes of cheerful comfort in her tones. When at last Mr. Lascelles insisted that it was time for them to leave, she managed to speak a few words to Austin alone. Agnes for the first time saw tears in his eyes as he turned away from her.

"No, no, Hannah, thank you. Indeed, I do not need it. Look after my little girl a bit, will you ?" he said. "*That's a good woman,*" he remarked when he came back, after they had driven away.

"Yes, but she's never had any trials," said Clare. "However, she's very kind, and at her age, and so fat, it's a wonder she can look as well as she does. Those sleeves that she had on, Agnes, were just what that woman ought to have put into this gown. Mourning's bad enough, I'm sure, without being made more ghastly by country dressmakers. I shan't be able to wear this at all when I go away. It will be just money wasted. And you're so pale, Agnes, that you look dreadful in black, as if your cheeks were covered with chalk. You can send me up some dinner if there's anything fit to eat. I'm going to bed. I'm quite worn out. I said so to Hannah Raleigh, and she said she was sure I must be."

Austin had left the room, and Clare went on, "I wish

I knew when Austin was going away. This sort of thing will kill me. He ought to go at once. People may see him and speak about it. It would be better for us all if he went to-morrow. *I'll* go, at least, as soon as I hear from London. You can go to Little Widger next week, Agnes, and leave Betty to look after things at the sale. The sooner we all get out of this hole of a place the better."

She went off to bed and Agnes sat by the window as the long spring twilight darkened slowly in the west. She began to think about all the arrangements that had to be made for the disposal of the house and most of the furniture—of what it would be like to part with Betty, and to drift out alone into the world as she must do. She thought about all the dismal things she had ever read or heard of women who had to work for their own living,—those columns entitled "Women's Employments" that she had so often looked over in the fashion papers Clare was always reading. One lay on the table, and she took it up and read it by the last dim light. "*Basket-making*: We fear there is no good opening for this, as the market is already overstocked. *Lavender farm*: Provided you have sufficient capital, and are prepared for probable failure at first. *Journalism*: This requires above all things a thorough training in short-hand, and acquaintance with the methods of the modern daily press which can only be acquired by experience. *Nurse to one child*: Nowadays these posts are by no means easy to obtain, as most mothers who think of employing a lady-nurse expect a thoroughly trained one," and so on.

"Dear me," said Agnes to herself, "is there anything in the world that is left for a woman to do? I might as well attempt to become a shepherd on the Grampian Hills, it seems, as do any of those things advertised as 'Women's Employments.'"

Presently her father came in. He sat down beside her in the dark. There was always a deep constraint between

them. Agnes did not know what to say, and he was silent. After a little, he said:

"I'm going away on Thursday, Nancy. The boat sails at six o'clock. You can't come and see me off."

"Oh, yes, I shall, of course. Father, you will write to me?"

"Yes, if you like."

"And you will let me come out some day, and make a home out there?"

He laughed shortly. "No, I don't think I will. What sort of a home would it be? The best thing I can do is to disappear for ever and leave you alone."

"Oh, don't say that," said Agnes. "Grannie wouldn't like to hear it."

"She hears nothing where she is now," he said, "and I wish I were with her. I'm sure I don't know what has kept me from getting to the end of it long ago." He got up and began to pace up and down the room in the dusk with his hands in his pockets, speaking in a low, hoarse voice. "Just the feeling, I suppose, that I wanted to stand a free man in the sunshine once again—to live for a little while, if it were only to eat and drink before I die. It will be easy to stop it all when I find it's no good. Poor little girl, what will become of you now?" He stood and looked down at her. "Write to your Cousin Hannah, Nancy, if you are in difficulties. She promised me she would be kind to you. If I am ever able to make any money, you shall have it; but I shall not be a burden on you, at any rate."

"Don't you think I should come with you, father?" said Agnes. She tried to keep out of her voice the unwillingness that she felt.

"No, child. Leave all the people you know to go with a stranger like me?" he said bitterly.

"I will write to you, father, *every week*."

He smiled. "Very well, Nancy. You won't expect letters from me very often. I shall let you know where I

go and what I am doing, and get some one to tell you when I'm dead."

"How did you know this man you are going out to? Was he a friend of grannie's, too?" asked Agnes timidly.

He stopped walking about the room and looked down at her. "He was a warder, Agnes—a good fellow—the only friend I had at one time. He is living with a brother, a schoolmaster, down somewhere in the southern states, and he promises to get work for me there."

It seemed to the girl that she could not find anything to say.

He went on after a minute, "Does it shock you that I have a friend like that? *Don't* think of me as connected with your world any longer, Nancy. I'm dead—*dead*"—he spoke slowly, pausing on the words—"as much as if I lay in the grave beside my mother. You can't understand, child. Don't try. Only let me go away—as far away as I can. Don't attempt to pull me back into the old life again."

"I won't," said Agnes. She rose and stood by him in the dim light. "But if you can ever make a new one, I'll come to you. I'll come to you whenever you want me, father."

He pushed her from him and turned away. She thought she had displeased him somehow, and stood frightened and silent. Then he muttered in a hoarse voice, still keeping his face from her:

"*You looked so like your mother!* Go—go away."

CHAPTER XXV

“W E’LL sell *everything*,” said Clare, looking about her delightedly. “Old furniture—not old enough to be valuable—is of no use to me, and I need the money. Furs are so expensive now, and I must have some before I go to Russia. Just burn all these letters, Agnes.”

It was the night after Austin Sorel had left. Clare had returned on the evening of the same day. He had not allowed Agnes to go to see him off, but she had gone to the ferry with him, and stood by the pier until she saw the boat touch the opposite bank, when he had turned and waved his hand to her in farewell. She had come back to the house, ashamed to be conscious of an immense relief.

Then, later in the day, Clare had returned—come back from town with her usual quantity of boxes; and now she was standing shovelling out letters from the drawers of her mother’s writing-table, and talking to Agnes about the disposal of the furniture. It was a joy to her to be leaving Ponde, and, exhilarated by the prospect of travel, and by the consciousness of having a little money at her disposal, she chattered away in the best of spirits.

“You won’t really need much, Agnes,” she went on, glancing at and tearing up letters ruthlessly as she spoke. “If you live at Little Widger, you can dress on very little.”

“But I cannot live always at Little Widger,” said Agnes.

"They don't want me always. You know Aunt Caroline has sisters of her own."

"Nearly as old and as mouldy as herself," said Clare contemptuously. "They might be thankful to have you. But you can come out to me," she continued airily. "I daresay I could get you something to do out there."

Agnes went on looking over the letters without speaking. A vast dreariness seemed to be settling over her mind with the wings of a huge black bird. All her accustomed ways were to be changed; all her home, such as it was, to be broken up. There seemed to be no one in the world who cared much about her. Clare's indifferent tone gave her the feeling that she might just drift away into an unknown future, like a bit of straw on the current of a stream. Her courage failed her, and she listened to Clare's chatter with a sinking heart.

"I must just try to find something to do for myself," she said.

"Oh," said Clare, "it will be dreary enough at Little Widger; but if you can make yourself indispensable to them they might leave you all their money. They can't live for ever. Old Timothy must be over eighty now, and she's not strong. If Hannah Raleigh is still with them, she might do something for you. She's a rich old cat, you know."

"Oh, Aunt Clare, how can you call her an old cat?"

"Well, an old pussy-cat, anyway. She's kind enough, after all, but *she'll* live to be a hundred and ten. Burn that—it's only old photographs of my father. I might take one of them—the one in uniform, perhaps. Burn all the others; there's no use keeping trash."

She went on with the work—tearing, crushing, burning, keeping anything that seemed as if it were of value, but nothing connected with sentiment; uttering contemptuous—sometimes angry—snorts, as she glanced over a letter

containing anything that displeased her, and never consulting Agnes as to the disposal of anything.

She interviewed a dealer about the sale of the furniture the next day. "You can go to Mrs. Ingraham's for a couple of nights, Agnes, and just pack up your things from there, and then *everything* will be cleared off." She seemed to exult in the thought of breaking off all connections with the past, and the scattering of all her mother's possessions.

"I'm sure I hope I shall never see this hole of a place again," she said, the night before she left, as they sat in the almost dismantled drawing-room. She looked across at Agnes, who was finishing some sewing for her.

"It's enough to make one quite gloomy to look at you, Agnes. You've no idea how unbecoming it is to you to look melancholy—you're white enough without that. If you were *me* you might have something to complain of—going back to drudgery amongst strangers; but you'll have nothing to do at Little Widger but take care of yourself, and rub off the mould when it begins to grow on you too thick," she concluded with a laugh. "By the way," she went on, "it's odd that Mark Bassett has never written, or come up here since mother's death." Agnes went on with her sewing, and made no reply. "I thought he would have come at once," Clare went on. "He must be away from home, and probably hasn't heard anything about it. I might almost send him a note."

"Oh, don't, Aunt Clare! He may have heard," Agnes exclaimed involuntarily.

"Pray why should I not do what I think suitable? What do you know about it?" was Clare's retort, incensed immediately. She sat down then and there, and wrote a note to Captain Bassett in her big, sprawling handwriting, and sent Betty away in the middle of her work to post it. "He can't have known I was at home," she said, returning to the subject in a few minutes, "and

of course, it would never occur to him to come and see *you*."

As the next day passed, and the day after that, and Captain Bassett did not come to Ponde, or reply to her note, she began to get indignant.

"He will probably come after I am gone," she said; "but it is his own fault if he does. Widowers are often very self-conscious," she added. However, in the bustle of her departure on the following day she forgot to say anything more about the matter. It was a lovely spring morning, and when all Clare's errands had been executed, her last box packed and re-opened twice to receive things she had forgotten, she left the unloved little home for ever—without even a backward glance as she went away. Agnes accompanied her across the ferry and drove with her to the little station.

There was a great deal of fussing and chatter before Clare's baggage had been disposed of. She wanted this thing in the carriage with her, and that thing on the seat, and something else on the hat-rack, and got out of one compartment with all her belongings and into another, and then said it smelt of smoke and went back to the first. She was in high good-humour, though, and leant out of the carriage window, her face flushed with excitement, talking gaily to Agnes—disposed even to be agreeable to the vicar's sister, who was going up to town along with her.

"People will probably think she is my maid!" she whispered, when plain little Miss Ingraham had gone along the platform to speak to a friend; "but that won't matter!"

She smiled condescendingly on the little woman when she returned, and even moved away a large hat-box, so that she might have a corner seat. "Well, good-bye, Agnes," Clare continued. "Write to me and tell me how you are, when you get to the Lascelles'. Try not to let the mould grow over you altogether! Those old

people have no feelings—they might as well be stuffed with bran; but they're not immortal, remember," she laughed. "Arrange about the furniture being removed as soon as you can. It can surely be managed next week, and send me the money you get for it as soon as you can. I'll need some of it at once. You shouldn't require any almost as long as you are at Little Widger, and I have so many expenses. Good-bye! I wish I had taken a cushion with me—these seats are so hard! It is a comfort to think I shall soon be travelling in a civilised way with a courier again!" She turned to re-arrange some of her packages. The train started and began to move out of the station. Again Clare returned to the window and waved her hand. Agnes had a last glimpse of her face, flushed and smiling, with the round black eyebrows raised in the way that made her expression so silly. Then she withdrew from the window, and the train swept out of sight.

"Will you be driven back, miss?" asked the man who had brought them to the station.

"No, thank you, I am going to walk home," said Agnes, and he drove off without her.

She set off slowly along the sunny road, and it flashed upon her suddenly that she had no home to go to any more. It was a bright and beautiful morning, when the cheerful business of spring was everywhere abroad. As she walked slowly up the hill she heard the larks above her, lost in the sky, and all round about the common little birds squeaked and twittered in every hedge. A man was exercising a young horse on the bare slopes of mild green grass that lay beyond the station. The sunshine poured down from the open sky, as if earth could never have enough of it.

"Home! home! I have got no home any more now!" Agnes repeated to herself.

The three miles seemed very long, and she was tired enough to be glad to sit still in the boat when she

crossed the ferry. It was a relief to her to find her Uncle Timothy waiting with the little carriage when she got back to the house. He had timed himself adroitly so as to avoid any farewell to Clare ; but he was very kind to the girl, and she felt less lonely because he had come to fetch her.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN she arrived at Little Widger, Agnes was delighted to find her Cousin Hannah still there—a presence that seemed to diffuse life and warmth through the household. As Mr. Lascelles and his wife made it evident that they wished no mention to be made of either Clare or Austin Sorel, had it not been for Miss Raleigh, the girl could never have spoken freely about her own affairs at all. But Hannah Raleigh, with a happy inclusiveness, could sweep together the most painful subjects, and would find something sympathetic to say, whenever Agnes talked to her about Clare or her father.

It was to her that the girl read Austin's first letter, telling how he had found employment. Clare did not write for some time. When at last she sent a long letter, it was a mixture of bitter complaint and boastful accounts of the comforts and splendours that now surrounded her.

"We travel in the greatest luxury, of course," she wrote; "and were it not for the incessant chattering of those abominable children, in whose company I am obliged to spend most of the day, I should enjoy myself extremely. When we were in Paris, I saw a good deal of a Mr. Moss, who has appeared again here. In my position, and surrounded as I am by petty jealousies of all kinds, it does not do for me to seem aware of his attentions; but he is a charming man, still fresh-looking, belonging to a good Hebrew family, and of course immensely rich. I could

have you out to Vienna if—but I need not make castles in the air, for a bitter experience has taught me, that whatever may be the case with other women, every one's hand is against *me*! I hope the Lascelles are kind to you, and give you plenty to eat—old shrivelled-up creatures of that kind so often stint in their food. You will still be in deep mourning, of course, but I think you ought to get a handsome feathered hat in autumn—a large black velvet one costing about four guineas will do up over again, and wear for years. *Remember* to send me the cheque for the furniture as soon as you get it, as I need it badly."

Even Hannah Raleigh found it difficult always to say something pleasant about Clare, but she laughed her rich, chuckling laugh at times as Agnes read the letters to her, and she managed to make the girl take a humorous view of her aunt, which was a help.

Agnes did not see Mark Bassett at all when she first arrived. He had gone abroad; but little Nellie, who was at home for Easter, came often down to the parsonage. The sight of her gave Agnes a curious, almost guilty feeling. Nellie was so utterly unaware of all that had passed between Agnes and her father, and clung to her with the same warmth of childish affection that she used to show at school.

Once or twice, when Agnes met Mrs. Ashton, she fancied that her manner was colder than usual, and she certainly did not second Nellie's frequent invitations.

Agnes had gone out one day to spend the afternoon with Nellie, who told her that Captain Bassett was not coming home for some weeks. The girl felt relieved, and she walked back to the parsonage more cheerful than she had been for a long time. After all, perhaps Mark would forget all about having wanted to marry her. She was such a child still in many ways that it was perfectly impossible for her to realise the thing from his point of view. We are none of us—even the most humble-minded—able to

see ourselves as others do, so it is hardly to be wondered at that Agnes did not realise the position. When a man like Mark Bassett (who had a tolerable opinion of himself) had once considered the possibility of such a marriage, the feeling that had drawn him on must have been a very strong one. But Agnes hoped that he would always like her, that in time all that had passed between them might be forgotten, and she become only "one of Nellie's friends" to him again.

She had been thinking of all this on her way home, and came into the little drawing-room of the parsonage looking brighter than usual. Hannah Raleigh sat alone by the window.

Agnes sat down on a footstool, and laid a hand on her knee. Miss Raleigh was the only person who ever caressed the girl—it was a pleasure to sit and hold her warm hands, or even to lean against her without speaking a word.

"Cousin Hannah," Agnes began suddenly, after a short silence, "do you think it's a dreadful thing to be married?"

"That depends on whom you marry, child."

"Grannie told me," said Agnes, without looking up, "that the only thing for me to do was to marry, if I ever could."

"Well," said Miss Raleigh, "there are a great many reasonable reasons for most marriages, Agnes, if you look at things in that way."

"But grannie told me that *no one* was quite happy," said the girl, looking up at the kind face above her. "She said you were one of the few happy people—and you have never married!"

Miss Raleigh laughed. "I'm not happy just *because* I never married, my dear—that's scarcely reason enough!"

"Then you think . . . it's a good thing to do . . . for some one like me, I mean—some one who has nobody in the world to care much for them?"

"Well, Agnes, I don't like to seem to contradict what

your grandmother said. No doubt there are a great many reasons why it would be desirable for you to marry ; *but one thing is needful*, and if you have not got that you may marry whom you please—you've missed the crown of life."

Agnes looked into her cheerful face. "Did you . . . were you ever . . . did you ever care much about any one, Cousin Hannah ?"

Miss Raleigh raised her little plump hand—she had very small, delicate hands for one so largely made. She twisted a ring on her finger, and looked at it for a moment in silence. Then she smiled. "Yes, Agnes, I loved the very clothes he wore. I even loved his wife !"

"Oh !" said Agnes, drawing a long breath. She crept closer to her cousin, and whispered in her ear, "You wouldn't marry any one else, if you were me—even if it was some one quite nice ?"

"Oh, dear child ! don't ask me to decide for you—you must act up to your own standard—that's what no one can do for you."

"I'm afraid it's not a very high one," said Agnes. After a minute she touched her cousin's hand again : "But I know some one who has a higher."

The older woman smiled down at her. "Well, live up to that, if you can !"

"But supposing that I *never* see him again !" The depth of an eternal separation was in the words, for Agnes had not a hopeful nature.

"Never is a long time, my dear," said Miss Raleigh. "Ah, but the sailor is not lost that can see a star !"

Mr. Lascelles came in just then, and Agnes went away. She leant out of the window of her own room, and looked across the quiet little garden, haunted by its humming bees, at the church tower and the sunny corner of the graveyard by the door, where she had stood with Terence. She still had the feeling that her bit of the world was empty—that all romance and interest lay on the other side of the sea.

That evening she sat and looked at her old relations with new interest. Her Cousin Hannah, fat and cheerful, sitting sewing beside the lamp; her Aunt Caroline with her stringed cap, precise and fidgety; her uncle with his spectacles on, reading aloud snippets from the *Guardian*.

"Have they all been in love once?" she thought. Easier, much easier, to have imagined them sucking wooden horses, or gambolling on all fours about the floor. They must have been children once, but were they ever young like her? And her Cousin Hannah, old and fat, with grey hair and so good, sitting there sewing pinafores for her niece's children—with all that behind her!

"Have they all forgotten?" she thought. "But they can't have been young like *me*!"

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CHAPTER XXVII

ELMA WOODS had been finishing her last term at school, when Agnes first came to Little Widger; but she returned in May, and then the two girls saw a good deal of each other. There was about Elma a kind of cool practicality very amusing in one so young. She had a dispassionate way of viewing any difficulty, which had always made her a valued counsellor at school, and now Agnes used to talk to her a good deal about her own future. To Agnes, in turn, Elma confided the history of her tragic attachment to the "ear-boy"—that same young Martyn who had lost an ear in a shooting accident, and had been conspicuous at Nellie's dance.

"He *hears* all the same as other people do," said Elma, "and that's what ears are for, isn't it? Besides," she added, "if they won't take him into the services in England just for a trifle like that, the best thing he can do is to come out to America, where people are too busy to count things like ears as they do in this old country. Shall you marry, Agnes?" she asked suddenly.

"I—I don't know, Elma," Agnes stammered, rather confused by the question. Her experience with Mark Bassett had been too real and terrifying to compare in conversation with Elma's little romance. She could not speak about it to any one.

"Well," said Elma, "*I'm* not going to marry as soon as we return to New York, as I daresay mother imagines I will. I've promised Herbert Martyn to wait till I'm twenty-one, anyway, and that's nearly four years still.

Aunt Margaret and Terence are coming after all in autumn," she went on. "At least, *she* is—just for a month though, for they've got to be home again by the 1st of October."

Agnes bent down to examine a flower (they were walking together in the garden), and hoped that Elma did not notice the sudden flush that came over her pale face. If Elma noticed, she said nothing; only as she went away she remarked:

"You must come over as often as you can when Aunt Margaret and Terence are with us. They don't care about me, you know."

Agnes ran into the house. She found her Cousin Hannah alone in the drawing-room, and going up to her, pressed her face against the pretty white hair, and whispered in her ear, "*He's coming soon, I think, Cousin Hannah. I'm so happy.*"

Miss Raleigh kissed her, laughed, and took no more notice of the speech; but the day she left Little Widger she gave the girl a ten-pound note, and told her that she wanted her to get some new dresses. Agnes' clothing—mourning made in a hurry by the nearest dressmaker—had certainly been very shabby all summer, and it gave her a good deal of satisfaction to have something better to wear.

She met Elma and her mother some days afterwards coming out of the little post-office with a bundle of letters. They were just starting to drive homewards.

"Here's a letter for you from Aunt Margaret, Agnes," called Elma, holding it out to her, leaning down from her seat in the dog-cart. "It was enclosed in mother's; she didn't know your address."

Agnes ran forward smiling, caught the letter from her hand, and they drove away.

When they were out of sight she hurried into the little churchyard, crossed the grass, and sat down on the edge of the low wall where she had sat with Terence a year before. It was a still, hot day, and before beginning

to read her letter she looked down, between the stems of the tall elms, at the distant country, glowing as usual in tones of blue and purple. Far, far off, as the day was clear, she could discern a glimmer of the sea. She smiled to herself, and opening the letter slowly, to prolong her pleasure, began to read.

It was a long letter, and type-written, for Mrs. Woods was not fond of writing. The first pages were filled with kindly sympathy. They had heard of the death of her grandmother, and Margaret wanted to know all about her plans for the future. "Terence is working very hard," she went on,— "so hard that he only comes to see me now and then, and gets thinner and thinner, so that I tell him that whatever heights he may gain in his future career, if he goes on this way, I shall soon be only the mother of a distinguished wraith! I am coming across in the beginning of September, if——"

Here Agnes turned over the page and found that the next sentence apparently did not fit in. She read on, trying to get at the sense of it, and thinking there was some little mistake. "*But,*" the next page went on, "*I shall do my best to discourage him. For one thing, he will really get a better holiday if he stays at home, as I am to be such a short time in Europe; and then, there is Agnes Sorel. Heaven knows, poor child, that if I had a daughter instead of a son, I should like nothing better than to have her come back with us. But when I remember that pitiful story, and the terrible connection Mrs. Ashton told us of, I cannot bear to think of anything between Terence and her. A connection like that is a curse to the third generation. I would do anything to save him from it—it would break my heart; so if I can prevent him coming with me, I certainly shall. . . .*"

Agnes sat staring at the paper: the words seemed to burn her eyes as she looked. She turned the sheet and looked vaguely at the signature—*Your affectionate sister*: understanding all of a sudden that a page of Mrs. Woods'

letter to Elma's mother had got mixed along with the letter to herself. She slipped off the wall, and crumpled the letter in her hand. When she got into the house she ran up to her own room and locked the door, and taking the paper, smoothed it out and read it slowly over once again. Then she lit a match and burnt it in the grate. After that she sat down with a hard lump in her throat and tearless eyes, and repeated it all to herself : "*I would do anything to save him from it. . . . A connection like that is a curse to the third generation. . . . It would break my heart. . . .*"

Outside, the swallows darted, piping about their nests under the eaves by her window. The clock struck from the church tower. The bees began to come home to the garden hives, the evening life of the village to stir. She heard the sounds of laughter from the boys returning from a game in the fields. It seemed to her impossible that she should have to rise and go down to a meal as if nothing had happened, and talk to her uncle and aunt and show herself to the world. She felt as if some one had struck her a stunning blow, and she had to raise her disfigured face and let every one see it. It was impossible. She could not do it. She would say she was ill and go to bed, and turn her face to the wall, and bear it alone as best she could. Yet, half an hour afterwards, she simply got up and changed her dress and came down to dinner as usual. Her Uncle Timothy conversed placidly on the making of cider ; her aunt sat with her afterwards and talked about mice ; and Agnes thought that the whole of her frail structure of hope and happiness was destroyed for ever.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"LORD have mercy on the young," said an old preacher, "for grief is very hard till a cry becomes a prayer."

In the week that followed Agnes entered the darkest caves of depression. The words of Mrs. Woods' letter were always in her head. She thought of them at night before she went to sleep, and before she awakened in the morning she was aware of the cold weight at her heart.

"And I thought she was so good and so kind, that perhaps she would forget all about it in time, if Terry cared for me. . . . 'I cannot bear to think of anything between them. . . . A curse to the third generation. . . . I would do anything to save him from that. . . . It would break my heart.'"

"She shall not need to do anything. I will never see him nor speak to him again if I can help it," thought Agnes. "I will go away—I will do anything; but never, never think of him again."

Resolutions so easy to make, and so difficult to follow! For the very next day that she met Elma Woods she found herself listening carefully to what she had to say about her aunt's arrival. Still, Agnes tried her best to dismiss the subject from her mind. She resolved to make some excuse to Mrs. Lascelles, and go away as soon as the date of the Woods' arrival was near. Maria Briggs had begged her to come and pay her a visit,

and that would serve at least for an excuse for leaving Little Widger.

The sale of the furniture in Ponde had taken place some weeks before, and now nothing remained in the house except a few things that Agnes did not wish to part with. Betty, too, who had remained in charge, was now leaving, and Agnes went down to the village one day to say good-bye to her, and see about the final disposal of everything.

Mr. Lascelles offered to go with her, but she told him she preferred to go alone. The long, slow drive, when she did not need to talk to any one, rested her. She shut her eyes and leant back in the carriage, trying to summon up courage to go on with life. Everything, for the last week, since she read that letter, had seemed to stop. There was no more brightness in the future—no more interest in the present.

She felt like a wounded animal, only wanting to crawl into a dark hole somewhere and lie still. The daily effort to speak and act as usual, that necessary daily exercise of self-control, which only the absolute earthquakes in life can ever break through, was an unspeakable weariness to her; and now that her Cousin Hannah had gone, there was no one to whom she could have breathed a word of her hurt.

So the relief of sitting still, able to close her eyes and to be as silent as she liked, was very great.

But when she drove again into the little village, the whole sense of her desolation broke over her afresh.

It was a still day down at Ponde, without a breath of wind, although on the uplands, as she drove across, there had been quite a breeze blowing. All the little craft on the river lay becalmed—rocking, just slightly rocking, with the almost imperceptible motion of the in-coming tide. Long reflections fell from the fresh oak-woods, so that down below another green forest seemed growing again to a deeper sky.

"I have no home here any longer," Agnes repeated strangely to herself.

The curious beauty of the place became suddenly new to her that day. The village people were all at dinner, so that the street was empty in the hot morning, and everything looked more than usually fantastic and unreal. Every here and there was a picture, like the illustration of a fairy-tale: the head of an old woman in a white cap, with a wrinkled face, appearing behind a pot of red wall-flower set on the sill of a casement window; at a tiny doorway in one of the elfish houses, that was hung all about with wreaths of blossom, two infant children, hand in hand, tottered down the low stone steps; through an open gate appeared a patch of grass: an orchard: a jet black cat sitting in a patch of sunlight by the door.

Already, owing to a month of neglect, the grass in the little garden of Mrs. Sorel's house had grown almost into hay, and was full of dandelions. The men who had removed the furniture had torn down a branch of the great wistaria that hung around the door, straw and bits of paper lay about the pathway, and the hall door stood wide open. Old Betty came out to meet Agnes. She, too, looked different, no longer wearing her cap and apron. She was very silent—afraid to trust herself to speak as she led the girl into the empty house. A charwoman, with whom she had been contending just when Agnes arrived, was slopping about with soapy water in the bare, empty little hall. Agnes went through the rooms with the old servant, discussing the last arrangements; and finally, when Betty had gone down again into the kitchen, she went up to the dismantled drawing-room by herself.

Two or three big packing-cases were still there, and there was a litter of paper and ends of string upon the uncarpeted floor. The walls showed strange patches where the pictures used to hang. Agnes went to the window where her grandmother's chair, now all weirdly

rolled up in sacking and straw, stood in the middle of the floor, ready to be removed next day. She sat down upon one of the wooden packing-cases, and leant her head against the window-shutter, and closed her eyes in a torpor of fatigue and despair.

Downstairs the sounds went on. She could hear the women dragging things about, tramping up and down, and calling to one another. This had not been a very happy home to the girl; yet now, as she saw it all broken up like a crushed, empty nest, a wave of desolation swept over her heart. Surely the tent-dwellers, here to-day and gone to-morrow, with no settled home to leave, must have been happy people. Yet to them, too, some sheltering bush or rock, some spring clearer than the rest, no doubt was dear! She began to think about the people that had formed her little world. Almost she might have counted them on her fingers.

"Shall I be old one day, like grannie, weary of life and disappointed in everything?" . . . What would Clare be like when she was old—a character incapable of improvement, that could only grow rancid with time? . . . "Could I become like Cousin Hannah?" she thought. "She looks as if she found life so sweet. It's because she's so good, I suppose, and never married. But Aunt Caroline's good, and she doesn't look like that; and Mrs. Woods is married. She *does*—her face shines; but Terence looks happy, too. He's not so very good—yet——" The large tears came falling from under her closed eyelids as she leant back against the window. "If there was only anything I could do to show them I didn't care," she said to herself piteously. "She must not think I mind at all. Oh, I think every one is successful and happy except me!"

She started up suddenly, hearing some one coming up the uncarpeted stairs. The firm tread echoed through the empty house.

"It is the man come to get the keys of the house," she thought, and wiped her eyes hastily. She pulled her hat

low down upon her forehead to conceal her face as much as possible, and stood up with her back to the window, hoping that no one could see how she had been crying. The door opened, and she saw, to her surprise, not the landlord, but Mark Bassett.

CHAPTER XXIX

"WHY," said he as he entered, "what are you doing all by yourself in this forlorn house? I looked up as I was passing the door, and saw you sitting by the window, and your old servant told me you were here alone."

"I came to arrange things with Betty before the house is all shut up," said Agnes. She hoped he would not see the traces of weeping on her face.

"And could no one help you with it? How could they let you come down to this dreary business all alone?" he said, holding her hand and looking at her very kindly.

"My Aunt Caroline is not fit for such a long drive," said Agnes. "Uncle Timothy offered to come with me, but I would not let him."

He looked about the desolate room. "Have you no one to help you, or take care of you, child? Where is your Aunt Clare? I had a note from her before she left home."

"Aunt Clare is gone," said Agnes. "She left at once—a month ago."

"And your father? I expected to find him still here, and I hoped that I might be of some use to him. Nellie told me in her last letter that you had come to the Lascelles, but I supposed it was only on a visit. I did not know your home had all been broken up so soon."

"There was—nothing—after grannie died," said Agnes, her voice faltering. "Aunt Clare could never have lived here—she hated the place; and my father wanted to go away at once."

"Where has he gone?"

"To a—a friend—to some one he knows about in the southern states," said Agnes. "He has got some work out there."

"You're not going with him?" Captain Bassett asked quietly.

"I? To America?" said Agnes. "Oh, no, I can't. He doesn't want me. He doesn't know me, really."

Then, suddenly, before she knew why, she blushed and blushed more and more deeply, till tears of mortification stood in her eyes, and her very ears were red.

Mark Bassett turned to look out of the window after giving her one glance out of his daring eyes. He vowed inaudibly to himself that "he would not be beaten by the little American, after all."

"And you? What are you going to do now?" he asked the next minute.

"I am going back to Little Widger this evening. I'm going to stay on there for a little."

"And then?"

"I don't know," said Agnes.

As she spoke the words that summed up her blank future, she raised her black eyes to look at him for a minute. Her blush had died away now, and she was very pale again. He took her hand, and the strong, warm, human feeling, the kindness in his face, made her draw nearer to him with an involuntary movement like that of a wearied child. She was scarcely conscious of what she implied by the action. In her hour of desolation he was something to lean upon: her hurt heart seemed to find a refuge in his kindness. She leant her head upon his shoulder and burst out crying. It was a good moment—the first natural

comfort she had had. She hardly knew what he was saying—only that he was strong and kind, and some one who cared for her. At last he bent his head and kissed her, and at that she raised her face, all smeared with weeping, and drew herself away from him.

"I must go now," she said. "I have things to arrange with Betty before I leave. The carriage will be here soon."

"I will stay and drive back with you," he said.

"No, *please*," said Agnes, the frightened look returning to her eyes. "I'd rather be alone. I want to think," she stammered. "I don't want to promise anything."

"But I haven't asked you for a promise," said he.

"You meant it all the same," said the girl desperately.

She was standing now facing the light, twisting her wet handkerchief into a ball with her trembling fingers. In her shabby mourning gown, with her face pale and swollen with crying, she was as lamentable a little figure as could well have been imagined. Certainly if Mark Bassett admired her then, his love was indeed blind. Agnes was far too miserable to have more than a dim consciousness of her own unhappy appearance.

"Tell me it's all right between us before I go," he asked. She hung her head in silence, twisting her ball of handkerchief with nervous hands. "I don't ask you to *promise* anything," he went on, "or to say anything you don't feel. If you will let me love you and take care of you, it is enough." He used an old argument.

"Oh, no, it *isn't*," said Agnes suddenly. "I know better than that."

"Well, it's good enough for me, when once we are married."

"But I don't want to be married," said Agnes.

"Wait and see. Perhaps you won't find it as bad as you think. I would take care of you, child. You would find life very different then."

"How?"

He looked at her a moment in silence, as if undecided what to reply.

"There would be no more loneliness," he said. Then, in a lower tone, "Will you do it, Agnes?"

Agnes stood still, looking on the bare floor, her eyes fixed on the little marks made by the nails that had held down the carpet. She counted the throbbing seconds. On one hand was all the treasure of her heart; but now her hurt pride and her resolution to have nothing to do with Terence: on the other was her black, blank, dreary future, and the terrors of her lonely position—the strong temptation of her weakness to fling herself upon this present help and kindness.

She waited in silence for another minute or two, still drawing her breath on a sob; then turned and put her hand in his without a word.

He was too wise to take further advantage of her yielding. He held her hand softly for a minute, and then said: "Well, I suppose I must leave you, if you won't let me drive home with you. I left my horse at the inn. You won't allow me to do anything for you?"

"Oh, please go!" said Agnes. Her cheeks were burning hot now, and her heart was beating fast. "I have so much to arrange with Betty still, and the carriage will be here at five to take me home, and Aunt Caroline expects me back in time for dinner. Do go!" she added with a sort of appeal, looking up at him shyly.

He laughed and went away. She stood looking after him from the window until he had disappeared. Then, instead of going down to Betty, she crouched upon the packing-case and hid her burning face in her hands. She could not allow herself to think of what she had done, but it was impossible to speak to any one until she had collected herself a little more. Then she heard the carriage drive up to the gate, and had to hurry down and give her final directions to the women, and say good-bye to Betty.

Then she crossed the threshold for the last time, walked slowly down the little garden, climbed into the carriage, and looked out until it had turned the corner of the steep road. Her last glance was at the window beside which her grandmother used to sit so often. Almost she could have imagined that she saw there once more the strong-featured, pale old face, with its deep eye-sockets and its clamped mouth. The carriage rumbled on past the turn of the road, and she sank back and looked out no more.

The drive to Little Widger was necessarily slow, for the frequent hills made speed impossible, and the summer twilight had gathered softly over the land before they came in sight of the village. Agnes wondered whether Mark Bassett had taken the same road, and if so, whether he had passed some time before her. A man on horse-back rode up behind the carriage as they drew near the village, and her heart stood still for a minute. But as he came closer, she could see it was only a farmer riding home from market.

Her aunt and uncle, perhaps realising some of the dreariness of her day in the dismantled house, were unusually kind to her when she returned. Still, the girl felt as if the evening after dinner lengthened out to a week. The hands of the clock must have stopped, she thought. Would she never be alone again, she wondered, as she tried to sit up and make conversation like the "bright" young person that all old people are so fond of.

But at last she was alone in the darkness, and then the trouble began. For it was her own thoughts she was afraid of, as she suddenly realised. Happily fatigue helped her. She was very tired, and for that night, at least, she could not, and she would not, think. She sank into troubled dreams—dreams full of drifting figures—her grandmother, her Aunt Clare, her school-mistress—hurrying around her on some urgent business, the familiar

rooms all in some strange way altered and filled with an oppressive gloom. She seemed to have lived through days of hurry and anxiety and bewildering impotence before she awoke with a start to the good light of day.

CHAPTER XXX

BY the time she was wide awake Agnes had realised that most fatal of all feelings—the cry of the innate coward lurking at times in every heart—that this morning it was impossible for her to get up and dress and face the day. How she would have welcomed illness, pain, any possible excuse for remaining in her own room! But she had none. How could it be that the friendly darkness of the night had rolled up like a curtain, and exposed her again to the necessity of facing the same difficulties in a new day! Had the promise she had given to Mark Bassett yesterday not been a part of her fevered dreams? Then the whole scene came back upon her with a vividness that made her, as she sat before the looking-glass, lay down her hairbrush and again cover her hot face with her hands. She calmed herself resolutely the next minute, and finished dressing. She would not allow herself to think about him again. For a little while, at least, she would have peace.

But when she went down to breakfast she found a note from Elma Woods, telling her that Terence and his mother were arriving the next week.

“You must come out and see Aunt Margaret as soon as you can. I know she will be anxious to see you,” Elma wrote.

Agnes sat so silent after reading the note that Mrs. Lascelles asked her if there was anything the matter.

“Nothing—nothing, Aunt Caroline. It’s only from Elma Woods,” she answered; adding, “It’s so hot indoors. I’ll go out into the garden, I think.” She did not wait

to get a hat even, but ran out of the house, anxious to escape from any further questions.

Out of doors everything was radiant in the summer morning. There was a promise of great heat to come later in the cloudless sky, but the lower land by the sea was still covered with a faint mist, and the warm air had a delicious freshness. Agnes went to the garden gate and stood looking towards the church tower on the left. In a few minutes she heard footsteps coming along the road behind her, and when she looked round she saw Mark Bassett. She could not run back into the house, for he was quite near now and had seen her plainly. He came towards her, looking hard at her as he approached. Between them lay only some twenty yards or so of sunlit road, yet to the end of her life Agnes could remember her sense of choking dismay before he crossed it and took her hand. The realisation that in such a short time—between yesterday and that morning—her whole relations to this man had changed, made her hardly conscious of what he was saying to her. She stood bareheaded in the dazzling sunshine, wishing at the moment that she had never been born. He, too, was rather embarrassed, and looked paler than usual.

"I want to speak to your uncle. Can I see him now?"

"Oh, yes, he is in his study. I'll take you in," she said gladly; then realised what he had probably come to say, and stood still, venturing for the first time to look up at his face. "I think, perhaps—wouldn't it be better to wait for a little before telling my uncle?" she said desperately.

"Why?" he said, looking at her hard.

The girl's eyes fell before his steady glance. "I don't know," she faltered.

"Very well, then, I'll go in and speak to Mr. Lascelles," he said, and Agnes without another word led him into the house.

She left him with her uncle, and went away into the drawing-room by herself. It was empty, but a humble-bee had flown in and was blundering round and round, knocking itself against the ceiling and the windows, and filling the room with a humming noise. Agnes did not even attempt to put it out. She stood playing with the tassel of the window-blind, with a confused sensation that she had been listening to that buzzing bee for centuries.

At last she heard her uncle's study door open, and then Mark Bassett came into the room. Agnes turned white when she saw he was alone. She knew that he was going to kiss her again, but her voice seemed choked in her throat. It was only when the embrace was over that she had courage to whisper some reply to what he was saying to her.

"Aren't you ever going to look at me again, child?" he asked, and Agnes again raised her eyes to his face. Very good-looking he was too, as he stood opposite to her with the sunshine striking on his slightly curled short hair and his smooth face. He was pale no longer, and looked very happy and triumphant.

Just then her aunt and uncle came into the room, and when Agnes saw the undisguised pleasure on their faces she felt as if a new fetter were being riveted upon her.

"Dear Agnes, this is very astonishing news which Captain Bassett has just given us; but very good news, too," said Mrs. Lascelles.

She came up and held out her hand to Mark, and told him how delighted she was, and Mr. Lascelles clapped Agnes on the shoulder with unwonted geniality, saying, "We are very glad, my dear—very glad indeed."

It was hideous to the girl, but she made an effort to say the things expected of her, and the old relations, who were neither of them very acute, were quite satisfied with her behaviour.

"*Why* are they glad?" she wondered to herself indignantly. "What business has any one to be glad about

any marriage, unless they know that the people love each other! It's just because I'm poor, and he is who he is, and I will be 'provided for' now."

When Mark Bassett had gone, she had to listen to the expression of a good deal more of her Aunt Caroline's astonishment and satisfaction.

"We had no idea, Agnes, that Mark Bassett ever thought of you in any other light than that of a school-companion of Nellie's. However, although the difference in age is certainly a drawback, it is not so *great* as to make it impossible."

"Not an *unsurmountable barrier*," said Mr. Lascelles, giving the remark the intonation of a joke. He was even better pleased than his wife, as he had realised more than she did the difficulties of Agnes' position, and Mark had always been a favourite of his.

"If he had been a *hundred* instead of forty-six, they would have said just the same," thought Agnes, excited to sudden bitter injustice by their open expression of pleasure, for certainly neither of the old people had any wish for her to marry against her will.

She escaped from the house in the late afternoon, and went out by herself to walk across the fields, going up and up by gradually ascending slopes, until she had climbed nearly to the edge of the moor. Then she threw herself down under the shade of a hedge and stared at the wide landscape lying below. The field she sat in was surrounded with hedges, and just below her was a gap that had once been filled by a gate, but was now left open. On either side of it young holly-trees grew out of the bank, their slim silver stems and night-black foliage unchanged by the summer heat. Between the trees, in the old gateway, a few sheep were huddled together in the shade; and beyond, through the gap, was visible again the enchanting distance of purple and blue. The sun was very hot, and Agnes was tired with climbing up the hill, but she could not rest and she did not dare to



NEARLY TO THE EDGE OF THE MOOR

think. The summer insects flew about in the dazzling air. She looked at them with an unreasoning envy of each unthinking, living thing. She envied the sheep huddled together by the gateway—the stringy little mountain ponies that were trooping across the moor above her. The sense of responsibility for her own actions, of the necessity for making her own decisions, pressed upon her with an iron weight. Impulse, and the weakness of a moment, had betrayed her into a false position, and how she could extricate herself she did not know. The words that her uncle had read that morning from the Psalms echoed over and over again in her mind: “*I stick fast in the deep mire where no ground is.*” It seemed to her at that moment that no woman had ever been so miserable as she, that hot morning, with the whole world lying there in the sun.

And the ugliness of it all! Was there any romance in the world? Or were all the stories that had ever been written only nonsense? That interview with Mark, amongst the packing-cases in the empty house, was like a nightmare to her. For after the one moment of relief, as she clung to him for comfort, each step she had made had seemed to sink her deeper and deeper into deception, like a morass in which “no ground is.”

As she sat and thought about it all, the afternoon wore on, the heat became less intense, the air ceased to quiver above the hot ground. One by one the sheep got up and shook themselves and spread about, beginning to nibble at the grass. The shadow of the holly-trees had shifted. The colour in the distance became less intense, and sounds floated up from the farmyard that lay below the hill. Agnes roused herself and began to walk slowly home. A whole golden day of life had been wasted—spread with all its charm before her eyes, like the good food that he loathes before a very sick man. Yet some regret assailed her as she looked about her for a moment before beginning to descend the hill.

"If my soul is ~~ever~~ free again," she thought, "I will not miss an hour of life. I will enjoy every moment of a day like this from morning till night!"

Her heart sank as she entered the house to hear that Mrs. Ashton and Nellie were waiting to see her. She had to go in and speak to them as well as she could. The awkward little interview came to an end at last. On both sides it had been unpleasant, although Mrs. Ashton really meant to be kind. Nellie, bewildered and shy, said very little; but she did not hug Agnes as usual, and sat looking at her strangely. Every word that was said made her feel as if she sank deeper in the mire. It appeared like a grotesque dream that she should be sitting there, hearing Mrs. Ashton talk about her marriage, and looking at Nellie's little red face pulled into an unusual gravity. How had she ever acted in a way to make such a situation possible?

CHAPTER XXXI

ELMA and Mrs. Woods had gone up to London for a week to meet Terence and his mother. They were all going into the country together, and were having lunch with some relations the day before they started.

"Terence will be here in just half a minute!" exclaimed Margaret Woods as she entered the hotel sitting-room, radiant in face, and in new clothing just bought in Paris. Her greetings were the brightest thing in nature. The whole company freshened visibly after her arrival, as birds begin to twitter when the sun comes out. Another sister-in-law (who was an Englishwoman), her mother—a silent widow-lady, with a keen eye for American differences—Elma and her mother, and a deaf old uncle of Mrs. Woods, made up the party. When Margaret Woods entered, the English sister-in-law kissed her warmly. The widowed mother forgot for a moment to criticise the way in which Elma had greeted her. The old man smiled as she sat down and began to pour silvery sentences into his ear-trumpet. He had not caught a word of the preceding conversation.

The half-minute had lengthened into nearly ten before Terence appeared. He came in in a hurry, saluted his aunt, paused uncertain before Elma and then kissed her also, and sat down to eat with great alacrity.

"Terence," called Elma across the table during the first pause, "do you remember Agnes Sorel?"

"What a question! Why, she helped to nurse me. Of course I remember her."

"Well, she's going to marry Captain Bassett. Do you know?"

Terence was pouring out a glass of wine as she spoke. For about two seconds he held the bottle in the air, then filled the glass to the brim, and carried it to his lips without spilling a drop.

"Oh, is she? That's news. Who told you, Elma?"

"Every one—Mrs. Ashton and Nellie. It was announced just before we came away. I wrote to her, because I hadn't time to go and see her. I guess Nellie's pretty sick about it all."

"Well," said Margaret Woods, in her high, clear voice, "that is astonishing news, Elma. But it's just another instance that planning or imagining other people's future is the very last thing one ought to do. Charming as Captain Bassett is—and I've always thought him so—I never would have planned for him as a husband for that child." Her face had flushed deeply, and she spoke with a slight tremble in her voice.

"What child?" inquired the uncle.

"Agnes Sorel," bawled Elma's mother, whose voice could never reach him properly. "You saw her when you were with us last summer—a *pale* girl with *black* eyes" (raising her voice at each word); "a friend of Elma's."

"Yes, yes, I remember. Is she dead, poor thing?"

"No" (loudly), "not dead" (louder); "only going to be *married* to a man old enough to be her *father*."

"Dear me, dear me," said the uncle compassionately.

He was now interested in the story, and leant forward eagerly to hear what Elma was saying. Terence had ceased to eat, and sat in silence looking at the tablecloth.

"I thought I told you that her father came home before the grandmother died, Margaret," said Elma's mother.

"From where?" the uncle asked.

Elma was cutting bread at the moment. She spoke with her usual passionless decision, her acute tones just a little shriller to make her uncle hear.

"That's what makes her so much to be pitied," she went on; and Terence stirred in his chair, and leant his elbow on the table. "He was in prison for murder—he shot some one years ago; and he's only just got out."

"So he came home, and just before her grandmother died. Oh, poor, poor child, I'm so sorry for her!" cried Margaret Woods. The quick tears rushed to her eyes. "Oh, Terence, why weren't we kinder to her? We never did anything for her at all."

Terence looked up at her, and smiled slightly, with the corners of his mouth tucked in; but he said nothing.

"Dear me, what a sad history!" said the uncle. "She was a sweet-looking girl."

"If we had only known about it," said Elma's mother, "we might have done something for the girl; but we never heard anything until after the father had gone. Indeed, although I knew from Elma that there was *something* wrong, none of us knew what it was."

Terence glanced at his mother, who was crumbling up her bread into powder, her eyes cast down and her face still rather flushed.

"None of us at school knew what it was," said Elma. "Mrs. Ashton told mother. You would have known there was something wrong, wouldn't you, Terence, from the way she spoke about her people?"

"I knew it long ago," said Terence. He got up from table. "I must go now, Aunt Mary. Look after my little mother till four o'clock, won't you? I'll meet you at four."

His mother looked up at him anxiously. She had not uttered a word since Elma had spoken. Only when Terence said he had known for some time, she gave a faint exclamation of surprise. He stood for a moment in the doorway replying to some question of his aunt's—a pleasing figure, alert with youth and bright intelligence, well dressed and cared for from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot. He was like some fine machine with

every bolt and nut polished and screwed tight, ready for its purpose in a moment.

"Terence had grown up quite a lot since last year," said Elma in her condescending way, when he had left the room.

"They all shoot up—shoot up," said the uncle, shuffling slowly to his feet.

"I suppose he has grown up. I'm slow to notice it," said Mrs. Woods. "When you've dressed a thing, and held it on your knee, and carried it about in its little night-gown in the hollow of your arm, you know, it's difficult to believe that it's a man. But it's becoming one now," she added with a sigh; "I see that in the girls of my acquaintance—the difficulties of those things."

"Yes, yes, girls, quite so?" said the uncle with a chuckle, still tendering his ear-trumpet in case she should say something more.

"It's enough to make even *bought* hair turn grey to think of it!" she called blithely. "And it's all before me still!"

"He's a good boy. What did you say he had bought?"

"We must all *buy* our *experience*, Uncle Rupert," Margaret called again, escaping further explanation with a laugh.

But she laughed no longer as she drove off in a hansom a few minutes later. The news that Elma had given them had, somehow, after her first moment of involuntary thankfulness, impressed her differently.

"Of course, I'm very thankful. It's the best thing that could have happened, and clears away all manner of difficulties; and yet—oh, how I wish Terry were on the other side of the ocean! How I wish we had never gone near Little Widger at all!"

She stared out unseeing at the crowded dusty streets as the hansom tilted along. Again it seemed to her that she saw the thin, pale child, whose "mourning eyes" had first attracted her notice that day nearly three

years before at the school dance. She remembered the appeal in those great black eyes, their depths of unchildlike woe, and the way that the girl had clung to her the first time she kissed her. She remembered the happy days at Little Widger when Terence was recovering, and Agnes, grown less shy, had seemed to blossom out every day in the new atmosphere of kindness and hope. And she was a good woman, with a heart like a sound apple—sweet to the core; so she could not escape from a faint feeling of treachery when she thought of how her feelings had changed when she heard about Austin Sorel.

"But what else *could* I have done? Oh, my boy—my boy?" The hansom drew up at the house she was going to. Margaret descended, and shook away, for the time being, her uncomfortable thoughts. "After all," she concluded as she went upstairs, "I did the wisest thing I could—man or woman can do no more!"

Conscience seldom replies to a retort, such as that; yet her silence is not always reassuring.

CHAPTER XXXII

TERENCE came in at the gate, and went up the little flagged path to the parsonage.

The clock on the church tower was striking in the same low, musical note that he remembered so well. How often it had counted out the painful hours of the night when he lay ill in that house ! He looked at the clipped yew-trees, the row of bee-hives against the sunny wall, the old stones covered with lichen, the deep-set windows of the parsonage—everything was just the same as when he saw it a year and a half ago. Yet, coming out of the rush of a larger life, and seen afresh through the medium of his inward passion of disappointment and contempt, the whole thing seemed to him distant and unreal, the village houses and the people like toy things you could brush aside with your hand. He looked at the parsonage, and laughed to think that he had imagined that he would be hurt by seeing Agnes again. After all, what did it matter to him ? He would just go in to see her, and show by his manner what he felt about a girl who could want to marry a man as old as her father. It was a contemptible position ; it had all been nonsense together ; he would think no more about her. His brain was clearer now, and he was not afraid of making a fool of himself any longer. If by any chance he saw her alone, he would be quite kind to her, but would manage to indicate what he thought of her behaviour. He still felt the curious sensation that he was walking in a dream as he stopped by the parsonage door. *He rang the bell and wondered at its foolish tinkle.*

But he wakened up all of a sudden to find himself listening politely to Mrs. Lascelles, who was asking about his mother, and looking every now and then at Agnes, who was sitting opposite to him, and who, after the first glance, had never again raised her eyes to his.

It was real then, after all. He scarcely knew what he said in reply to Mrs. Lascelles; but in a few minutes, when Agnes had risen to carry a cup of tea to her uncle, he took the cup from her hand, and as he did so, touched her fingers for a moment, and it burnt him as if he had been stung. Once again she looked up at him. Their eyes spoke to each other. *I'm too late*, said his; *What have I done? what have I done?* said hers; and all the time they moved and talked just like two rather shy, ordinary young people. Mrs. Lascelles thought that Terence, though he looked much older, was not "so bright" as he had been before. She did notice, too, that Agnes was rather silent; but she thought she looked tired, and attributed her silence to fatigue.

"My mother is coming to see you to-day," said Terence. He spoke with a curious stiffness, and, had Agnes had eyes to see, he looked not nearly as handsome as usual; for the lines in his face had hardened, and he stood rather awkwardly listening to Mrs. Lascelles' little remarks. Every bad point in face and figure became accentuated—even his voice took a more distinctly American tone. When Agnes heard that his mother was coming, she felt a sudden rally of pride.

"She shall *not* think that I ever cared at all," she said to herself. "If she knew that I had seen that letter, I suppose she'd try to say that she had not meant it; but she did. She thought of me as a dangerous thing to be avoided—as a curse. She shall see that other people cared about me too." Her face flushed, and she held up her head, beginning to talk to Terence with a sudden animation that surprised herself.

At last Mrs. Woods came in, tall, smiling her gracious

smile, and uttering her sweet staccato greetings. She swept into the room with a rustle of voluminous skirt, her out-stretched hands seeming eager to clasp all of theirs at once, and caught Agnes in her arms and kissed her just as she used to do.

"And let me look at you, dear! You've grown quite lovely!" She held her back and looked into her face. Terence, still standing stiff and straight, also looked at her, and Agnes met his eyes for a moment. The expression in them made her wince, so that she turned away from Mrs. Woods in confusion, which Margaret attributed to shyness as she was congratulated upon her engagement.

Agnes, with down-cast eyes, listened to the praises of Captain Bassett.

"We saw him yesterday," said Mrs. Woods, "and I would give anything to stay for the wedding, if that were possible. I should like to dress you for the occasion, Agnes, and do your hair with my own hands, and arrange your veil and make you into the loveliest bride that ever was seen, if I might!"

"You're very good," said Agnes, flushing painfully, "but there isn't anything exactly settled yet."

"We hope that by October," Mrs. Lascelles began.

Mrs. Woods turned to listen, and Agnes heard no more, for Terence had sat down beside her.

"Well, Agnes!" he said in a very low voice, as Mrs. Lascelles and his mother were eagerly discussing the question of how many guests the parsonage could hold for the wedding, "you have forgotten all about me, I suppose?"

"No; why should you think that I have?"

"It's self-evident, isn't it?"

"You mean because I——"

"Oh, I think you know quite well what I mean!" said Terence. He spoke in a light, even tone that could not attract attention from the others. "There is nothing more to be said. I have only to offer you my good wishes."

Agnes made no reply. She twisted the corner of the sofa cushion beside her, and did not look up at him at all.

"I'm going off to Scotland on Thursday," Terence went on. "I shall stay up there until mother is ready to go home, then meet her in London."

"Oh," said Agnes faintly.

"Going, mother?" said Terence, as Mrs. Woods rose to take leave.

She gave a quick look at him and Agnes, for although she had not overheard a word of their conversation, her instinct warned her that it had been unpleasant, and she hurried her good-bye, conscious that her words of affection to the girl would ring a little false. Terence stood beside her in silence, watching, with the corners of his mouth tucked in. Mrs. Woods made Agnes promise that she would come to see them along with Captain Bassett very soon.

"He has gone away for two days," said Agnes; to her relief, it seemed quite a protection to speak of him in that way. "We'll come on Friday, if that will suit you."

"Terence won't be there; he's going away," said Mrs. Woods.

"Yes, I know," said Agnes. "I'm sorry. But Mark only comes back on Thursday." His name sounded very strange to her as she pronounced it. It was the first time she had ventured to call him "Mark" to any one.

"Mother," said Terence quietly as soon as they had left the parsonage. "Your hat is all on one side."

She clutched at it at once: "Is that right now? Which side, Terence, tell me!"

"Yes, that's better; but your hair seems coming down or something."

"Oh, Terence!" She raised her arms and began to pant. "And there is Mrs. Martyn's carriage coming, I believe! This veil will drive me crazy! Hold that pin! Is that better?"

"Rather worse, dear, but I can't help you. Try not

to look as if you knew. A smiling face will carry off anything, as you have often told me!"

By the time that the veil was adjusted, the carriage—the Martyns' carriage it was—had driven up, and they had spoken to the occupants for a few minutes, Terence began to hope that his mother's attention had been thoroughly diverted.

But when the Martyns had driven on, and they had walked in silence for a little, Mrs. Woods began all at once in a different tone.

"Terence, do you think that Agnes Sorel is happy?"

"My dear mother, how on earth can I tell? I presume she is, or she wouldn't have done it."

"I don't know—I don't know—I wonder!" said Margaret. She untied her veil, letting the long ends float, and forgot all about her hat having a tendency to the right side whenever the strings were loosened.

"Oh, Terry!" she began passionately, catching hold of his arm and letting her skirt flop in the dusty road. "I do so *want* her to be happy, to make up for her sorrowful childhood, to be sheltered and pleased and cared for like other girls. I want every one to be happy always," she added conclusively.

"I'm sure you do. But, mother"—he very gently disengaged his arm—"there is such a long bramble caught in your skirt, you know."

He disentangled it very slowly, tearing inches of frill off as he did so, and when the agitating process was over they had to hurry as much as they could to get home in time for dinner.

After they left the parsonage, even Mrs. Lascelles could not help observing how pale and strained Agnes looked.

"Are you feeling quite well, Agnes?" she inquired, looking at her anxiously.

"I'm tired with talking, Aunt Caroline. I'll go and rest for a little, I think."

"You're not feeling unhappy about anything, are you,

my dear ? ” the old lady asked, peering at her in a gentle way.

“ ‘ Feeling unhappy about anything ! ’ ” thought Agnes. “ Goodness ! How little she knows ! ” She felt inclined for a moment to make some passionate retort, and fling herself out of the room. It was as though you were gently asked whether you felt uncomfortable while you were being burnt alive. She looked at her aunt for a moment before she again replied that she was tired. Something made her suddenly remember her father, and the expression of his face as she had first seen him, when he stood looking at them all from the doorway on the night that he came home. The almost sardonic look with which he regarded them—out of an experience of which they were all so ignorant—seemed to ask what their pity could mean to him ?—nothing but so much wasted breath ! There can be no sympathy where there is no comprehension, and what could they know of what he had endured ? It made her understand all of a sudden what had so puzzled her before—why he had chosen to go out and join some one who had known him in prison.

“ I understand now ! ” thought Agnes.

CHAPTER XXXIII

“**D**OES Agnes look happy ?” asked Maria Briggs pensively. She had come to spend a day or two with Elma, and was sitting in the garden, very carefully protecting her fat face from the sun with a much-befrilled parasol.

Elma looked up and her eyes twinkled curiously. “Not what I’d call happy,” she drawled ; “but people are so different. Things strike them so differently. Some people, now, notice Herbert’s ear the very first minute they see him, instead of noticing how handsome he is.”

“You mean the ear he hasn’t got ?” said Miss Briggs, who was always literal.

Elma winced slightly, and then went on with composure, “If you like to put it so. One would think that other people had *ten* ears instead of two, from the fuss every one makes about it !”

“If we had ten, the loss of one wouldn’t seem to matter quite so much,” said Miss Briggs. “But I like Herbert Martyn very much, Elma, and I’m sure if he’d just grow his hair a little bit longer on the left side, no one would ever notice——”

“He *just wouldn’t*, then !” said Elma hotly. “He keeps his hair just as short as other men, and always will !”

“That’s very nice of him—so frank, and much better style, as he’s not musical, is he ?” said Maria soothingly.

“No, not very. He’s quite a good ear——” began Elma ; and then, seeing a sudden inclination in her companion to smile, she burst out indignantly, “One can’t get away

from it somehow! And yet it's such a little, miserable thing! But it annoys mother all the time, and the boys just *can't* let it alone. Yet there's that cousin of Captain Bassett's who lost a whole arm in Africa, and every one seems to think it rather fine!" Angry tears stood in her eyes, and she looked away from Maria, afraid of seeing her smile again. But Miss Briggs was a kind-hearted creature. She preserved an immovable face.

"I shouldn't think any more about it, Elma," she said. "Why did you think Agnes wasn't happy? Captain Bassett always seems such an interesting man," she added, with a relapse into her grand manner again.

"Interesting? At forty-seven!" echoed Elma. "Well, I guess in America he'd be about a relic by this time, instead of being married to a girl like Agnes."

"Didn't she look happy?"

"Perhaps *you'd* think so," said Elma, still ruffled. "She looked like a mouse in a trap, if that's what you call 'happy' in England!"

"It isn't," said Miss Briggs solemnly. "You know that American marriages are so often unhappy, that it's quite difficult to keep from being divorced."

"We only manage it now and then!" said Elma. "But my relations haven't done it yet, nor any one I know. We'd better come back to the house before we quarrel, Maria Courteney Briggs!"

"I must go and see Agnes to-morrow," said Maria.

"Oh, she is coming up this afternoon, and Captain Bassett also, so you will see both of them," said Elma. "I'm sure I think Nellie Bassett has behaved like an angel. She's never said a single nasty thing to Agnes, though she cried for a week when she first heard it."

"Nellie was always very fond of Agnes," said Maria. "But of course, 'circumstances alter cases,' as Matthew Arnold says; and my mother always says that the position of a stepmother is the most difficult thing in the world—except being a clergyman's wife."

She inclined her parasol to another angle, and moved gracefully across the lawn, fully conscious that Terence and Herbert Martyn were both looking at her. They were standing together at the door as the girls came up. Terence had delayed his departure for another day, after all. In spite of her airs Miss Briggs was really an absolute child at heart still, and, when she had uttered a few languid sentences in her grand manner, was smitten with sudden shyness, and had nothing more to say, so it was quite a relief to her when Agnes arrived.

Elma had seen her coming up to the house and went to meet her, and they came out in a few minutes to the lawn where the others were sitting. Agnes held out her hand to Terence without a word. She never looked at him again, but sat talking to Maria Briggs with her face averted from him. He could see her delicate profile against the dark background of the cedar-tree by which they sat. Her black eyebrows were drawn together, and her soft mouth quivered a little every now and then, as if she suddenly remembered something painful. She was wearing a white linen dress, and a black hat, and the simplicity of her appearance was in a marked contrast to Miss Briggs, whose costume suggested a fashionable watering-place.

Agnes felt curiously ill at ease now with both of the girls. It was as if a barrier had suddenly been erected between them, and all the innocent gossip of school, and all their small jokes and secrets were no longer of any interest to her. She was singled out for a sacrifice that they knew nothing of; she had entered a world where Elma's interest in Herbert Martyn, or Maria's feelings about "coming out," were as trivial as if they had been playing with dolls. She knew, too, that they regarded her with a sort of awe, as one set apart, and it made her horribly uncomfortable.

Mark Bassett came a little later, looking very well and handsome. Terence stiffened at his approach, and presently strolled off with Maria Briggs, leaving Mark and

Agnes alone, as Elma had gone into the house with Herbert Martyn.

Mark seated himself in a low chair beside Agnes, and leaned forward, smiling, to look into her face.

"Tired, Agnes? You are very silent."

"Yes, I think I am tired," she answered. "I slept badly last night."

Mark looked across the lawn where Terence and Miss Briggs were sauntering side by side.

"Your little American is going to-morrow, I suppose. He hasn't made a long stay!"

"He's been here for three days," said Agnes slowly.

"Things have hit him a bit hard. He's got very little self-control——"

"I don't think so; he's very brave," said Agnes.

"Oh, yes, brave enough when his bones are broken; but the heart is a different matter at that age!" He laughed, and looked very pleasantly at Terence as he spoke.

Agnes turned her face to him. "Oh, I'm very miserable!" she exclaimed suddenly.

"Why?" he asked. "Is it about your little American? You see, the only effect of your rebuke has been to make me call him so always. Never mind him, Agnes. He'll get over it in time. All of us have to go through something of the kind. It's not your fault."

"It isn't that," said the girl. "It's not about him. I didn't know—but I am miserable myself!"

He leant over and took her hand. Terence and Maria had gone out of sight. Agnes allowed it; she loathed herself for doing so, and she loathed him for doing it, and yet some spell seemed to be on her, and she could not withdraw her hand.

"Poor child!" he said, "you're tired and dull. You've been too much with old people. When you belong to me everything will be different."

Agnes drew her hand away. "Oh," she said, "don't"

I can't bear it—everything is all wrong! I—I don't love you at all!" As she got more courage she spoke with decision. "It's been all a mistake. I cannot marry you, indeed I can't!"

"Do you mean what you are saying?" he asked.

"Yes, I do. Oh, do let me go home now. I can't bear this!" She half rose from her seat, trembling and pale.

"Agnes," he said, "do try to behave reasonably. You are not a child. You can't go home just now. I will walk home with you, and you can talk to me then. This is not the time to discuss such a matter. Sit down, and don't let every one see that you are excited."

"I will! I will!" said Agnes.

The moment was dreadful, but she knew that Elma's mother and Margaret Woods were just coming out, and that the others would reappear immediately, so she forced herself to sit back again, and tried to compose her features.

Mark stood up in front of her, his hands clasped behind him, his head bent, looking on the ground. No one could have told from his appearance that there was anything the matter.

Agnes went on in a trembling voice. "Please be kind to me, and forgive me, and believe what I say. I have never cared for you at all. I cannot—I will not marry you. I'd rather die!"

"There is no question of dying; only of breaking your word and your faith," he said. She heard him add in a lower tone, "I might have known!"

The girl flushed. "That one of our family could not be trusted, you mean?" she said.

"Oh, Agnes! Have I given you a right to say such a thing?" he began; but Agnes scarcely heard him.

"Of course it was noble of you to think of marrying me," she went on. "My people and name could only be a disgrace to you; but I can't do it!"

Again Agnes half rose from her chair, but just at that

moment Mrs. Woods and her sister-in-law came out of the house. The high voices sounded cheerfully as they came across the lawn.

With a tremendous effort the girl turned to speak to them. In spite of the hot sunshine she was shivering so that Margaret cried out, "My child! you are as cold as an icicle! What do you mean? You're not ill, are you?"

"No, thank you. I'm cold, I suppose, because I've been sitting still for so long."

"Come and walk to the end of the garden with me, and if that doesn't thaw you, you must really be the Snow Maiden that I called you last year," said Margaret.

They walked together across the hot turf, but the sunshine dazzled Agnes. She could scarcely understand what her companion said. In a few minutes Maria Briggs and Terence joined them, and Agnes presently found herself walking alone with him. He did not speak at all at first; then, as they approached the house again, he said, "Elma told me that your father had come home."

"Yes," said Agnes. "That was before my grandmother died."

"We heard of Mrs. Sorel's death. My mother wrote to you," said Terence, his voice was low and constrained. They seemed to be speaking to each other across a gulf.

At the mention of his mother's letter the blood ran into the girl's white face again. "Yes," she answered quickly, "it was very kind of her. She wrote to me at once. You never wrote——"

"Because I was coming to say what I wanted, instead of writing it." He paused for an instant, then added, "But in London Elma told us about your engagement."

Agnes walked on in silence.

"I hope that you will be very happy," said Terence.

She looked up at him for a moment, catching the light striking on his smooth face and his bright hair. She could not trust herself to look again, and made no reply.

It takes a very high tide of feeling indeed to break away the ordinary restraints of custom, so Agnes somehow or other got through the next hour, moved about, and ate and drank, and spoke without betraying in any way what she suffered. She moved automatically, and answered at random, but ordinary conversation can admit of a good deal of wandering thought, and no one noticed anything remarkable about her manner.

Mark rose when she did, saying that he would walk home with her. Agnes did not look at Terence again as she bade him good-bye.

"Do you know," remarked Miss Briggs, who stood beside him as Agnes and Mark Bassett went away, "*I think Agnes looks very ill.*"

"She is always pale, isn't she?" said Terence.

"Pale, but not quite so pallid," said Miss Briggs, pleased with the adjective. "Her aunt and uncle are so very old. Elma says she looks like a mouse in a trap."

"Elma talks a lot of nonsense!" he said angrily.

"Well," Maria went on, with her grand air, "Agnes has had such a trying time since her grandmother's death—enough to make any one look pale. She will develop wonderfully with time, no doubt. I consider Captain Bassett such an interesting man—though he is so old! But 'tastes differ,' as Matthew Arnold says."

Terence received the quotation in silence, and Maria turned away rather mortified, to drop her grand manner again as soon as she was alone with Elma.

CHAPTER XXXIV

AGNES and Mark Bassett walked together almost in silence down the avenue, and through the wood that surrounded the house.

It was a golden evening. The opening at the end of the wood, where the road emerged into the light again, shone in front of them like a picture. The shadows lay deep across their path, a wood-pigeon was cooing and gurgling amongst the tall trees, and the scent of the pines came sharp upon the evening air.

When they came out of the shadow the sun was still striking brilliantly on the lower lands. A beautiful evening it was when such a pair of lovers as they outwardly appeared to be were in the right environment.

An old man who passed them on the road looked at them kindly, and sighed to think how long ago it was since he had been happy like that.

As the sound of his slow footsteps died away Mark said to the girl, "Now I want to hear what you have to say."

Hé paused as they came near a gate, beyond which lay the open road. His voice was quite steady, but he looked a little paler than usual, and Agnes could hear a hard note in the words. She did not look at him. Her eyes were fixed on the gate before them, the bars of it dark against the golden sky. It seemed to her as if, before she passed through that gate into the open road beyond, she *must* have made a decision. She would either make one

struggle for life and freedom, or else she would give it all up "and evermore keep silence."

When they came up to the gate she stopped, and then she lifted her face suddenly. The golden light struck across it, softening its pallor, and shining on the edges of her dark hair.

"*I can't do it,*" she said. The words seemed to come out of her mouth without her own volition. "I should never have given you a promise at all. I didn't know what I was doing. I don't know how or why I ever did it at all, but I cannot marry you. Oh, forgive me and let me go."

Mark stood and looked at her. He was not vain enough to be blind to the unmistakable misery in her face. He looked for a long time; then he said slowly:

"Since when have you felt like this?"

"All the time," said Agnes in a low voice. She turned, and leant on the bar of the gate, trembling from head to foot in her agitation.

"And you deceived me. You let me think——"

Agnes could not answer. She was crying bitterly, and had hidden her face in her hands. Then, to her utter discomfiture, she discovered that she had lost her pocket-handkerchief. She sobbed on, and every moment it became more impossible and degrading to raise her tear-stained face. At last she did look up.

"Oh, I've lost my handkerchief!" she sobbed, rubbing her smeared face with her hands.

"You poor child," said Mark. He stood in the place of the accuser, but for a moment he was melted to an amused pity.

"There," he said kindly, tearing his own handkerchief in two, and handing her one half, "dry your eyes, and stop crying. It will do no good to either of us."

She took the handkerchief, cried harder than ever for a moment, then dried her eyes, came near to him, and

placed her little, cold, soft hand in his, as a child might have done.

"Did you really mean what you said, Agnes?"

"Yes, I did," said Agnes.

"Will you think about it for to-night, and write to me to-morrow when you are calmer?"

"I don't need to think," said she.

Again he was silent; then, with a slight quiver in his voice, he said, "It's all over then, is it?"

"Yes," said Agnes. She hid her face in her hands again.

"There is some one else—some one whom you like better than me?"

Agnes drew a long, difficult breath. She twisted the torn handkerchief in her hands, and never raised her eyes.

"Yes," she said at last.

"You are quite sure? You are not making a mistake this time? You know what you mean?"

"I know. I am quite sure. I am not making a mistake *now*."

"Very well, then. I cannot hold you to your promise in that case, of course. It's all over. Good-bye. I'd better say good-bye here, I think."

Somehow or other it was over. He had turned away. She heard the sound of his retreating footsteps. Then she slowly raised her head, opened the gate, and passed out into the road beyond.

She felt as if waves had passed over her, and beaten all the life out of her. Her hands were trembling, her eyes dim with weeping; but it was the agitation of a prisoner escaped, who knows not where to go or what to do, dizzy with the first relief of freedom.

The sinking sun sent long beams of light across the distant sea, and the air was growing cooler in the gathering dusk. Below her lay the little hamlet, with the square church tower visible above the trees. The bats began to come out; the swallows were flying homewards. All about her were the honied scents of a hundred fields.

For the first time for many weeks past she drew her breath with pleasure.

Yet she felt half afraid to go into the house, knowing that before long she must explain her position to her aunt and uncle. The thought of this was terrible enough; but, after all, nothing that they could say about her conduct would be half as dreadful as the bondage from which she had escaped.

Her own suffering made her unjust to the man. She alone had been to blame, and yet he had become hateful to her from the first moment of their engagement. All the minute touches of personality, so dear in the beloved, so offensive when the heart is cold, recurred to her memory. His voice, his way of looking at her, his little gestures and attitudes, his laugh, the way his eyelids crinkled up at the corners, his grey-be-sprinkled hair—everything which, had she loved him, she would have counted fondly in her heart, now struck her with a sort of loathing that she could never have put into words, that she hardly even dared to think about. The remembrance of his touch on her hand, of his arm around her, his kiss upon her mouth, made her heart stand still.

It seemed to Agnes that she had committed some shameful act, and as if "all the perfumes of Araby" could never make her sweet again.

The evening wore through somehow, though it seemed as long as a week. At last she was alone in her own room, and able to think once more.

It was a dark night, warm, starless, without a sound. Through the open window came a strong smell of flowers from the garden below. It was too dark even to see the difference of tone between the earth and the sky, but she rejoiced in the darkness, that seemed a kind of shelter.

She felt beaten down, worn out, despising herself, as she had never done before; but with a breath of thankfulness, she knew that she was free again to think as she

pleased. Silently, in the darkness, she opened her heart to the old vision, remembering how Terence had looked when he had bid her good-bye—the stern displeasure and contempt upon his face. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered now, not even that they should never meet again ; for the falsehood had gone from her soul, and she could sleep that night in peace.

She laid down her head with a sigh, and drew a handkerchief from under the pillow to dry her eyes again, when suddenly she felt its torn edges and remembered what it was.

She could not sleep with it there. With a shudder, as if she could scarcely endure to touch the thing, she threw it away ; then remembered that it would be lying on the floor to confront her in the morning, so she lit the candle and got out of bed ; then took up the handkerchief, tied it into a hard, tight knot, and, leaning on the window-sill, threw it from her as far as she could. The night was so dark that she did not even see where it fell. After that she went back to bed, and the moment that her head touched the pillow, fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXV

“**E**XPLANATION!” said Mr. Lascelles in his precise way. “There can be no explanation of such an action, except the one that you have no regard for your plighted word, or for the feelings of the man you have thrown over.”

“But, Uncle Timothy,” began Agnes in a trembling voice; but Mr. Lascelles turned from her without listening.

“I am ashamed of you, Agnes! Ashamed of your conduct, and of the low notion of honour that it implies. I have nothing more to say to you upon the subject.”

He walked out of the room, shutting the door with as near an approach to a bang as his character permitted. A few minutes later Mrs. Lascelles entered in tears. Then ensued another half-hour of useless argument and attempts at explanation—when, indeed, the old man had summed up the truth by saying that no “explanation” of such an action was possible.

As Agnes sat listening to her aunt’s feeble yet persistent iteration, she felt as if she would never be at the end of the matter; and when finally she heard that Captain Bassett had come, and wanted to see her, her courage nearly gave way.

“I hope—I trust, Agnes, that when you have spoken again to Mark you may reconsider your decision,” said Mrs. Lascelles, rising, tearful still, but delighted to think that things might turn out more fortunately after all.

"You are so young. You have acted hastily. I feel sure that he will overlook it—will pardon the little impatience that has made you—— Dear Agnes, pray try to behave with some regard to his feelings as well as your own. When you see him I feel sure——"

"But I don't want to see him. I have nothing more to say."

It was what she said to Mark when he came, "I have nothing more to say"; and at the end of half an hour she could only repeat it again.

It would be hopeless to try to report the miserable argument, the repetitions, the wearisome dialogue that ensued. A great writer has, once for all, given a picture of the difficulties that attend the breaking off of any engagement. It is almost impossible to exaggerate the mortification and the useless and weary iteration that follows. Agnes felt as if she were a fly trying to wade out of a pot of glue. Every now and then she almost gave up the struggle and sank back; but at last, somehow or other, she said the last word, or said what she had said many times before, in a way that convinced her lover. He stood before her with his head bent, struggling to hide his feelings. At last he held out his hand.

"Good-bye, then, Agnes." He looked at her for a moment or two. "My God! and to think of the child that you were when I saw you first!"

He let her hand fall and turned sharply away. She could hear him draw his breath very hard as he left the room. She heard him go out of the house and walk down to the gate. Then there was a long silence. Then her Uncle Timothy came into the room, holding his spectacles in his hand, looking at her with stern inquiry.

"Well, Agnes?" he said.

"Captain Bassett has gone away," said the girl.

"Am I to understand that everything is at an end between you?"

Agnes nodded—she could not speak ; then said very low, " Yes, Uncle Timothy."

" I cannot discuss the matter with you any further," said Mr. Lascelles, " lest I should be betrayed by my feelings into speaking perhaps too harshly ; but my opinion of your conduct——"

" Oh, Uncle Timothy, I'm so unhappy !" the girl exclaimed. She moved toward him with a gesture of appeal. " Won't you try to understand ? "

The old man pushed her from him with his bony hand. The hard, unsympathetic touch of it chilled her.

" As I said before, Agnes, there is no explanation possible. Go away to your own room, and perhaps reflection may bring repentance for your conduct ; but nothing can undo the disgrace you have brought upon yourself and upon us by your behaviour." He turned from her, and went back to his study and closed the door.

About six o'clock that afternoon Agnes was lying in her own room. The blinds were down, and she had turned her face from the light. Her eyes were swollen with crying, her throat sore, her head throbbing wildly. All day she had had no food, for her meals were sent untasted away. Mrs. Lascelles had come up in the morning after Captain Bassett had gone ; but even she, though usually so gentle, had only echoed her husband's opinions.

Ruth, the parlour-maid, who had brought the girl her meals, had coaxed her to eat. To please her, Agnes had tried to swallow a few mouthfuls ; but the food literally stuck in her throat, and she pushed away the tray and turned again upon her pillows with a sob.

The " great kitchen tribunal " was uncertain what had gone wrong, but gathered from Captain Bassett's early and brief visit in the morning that there had been a quarrel. The servants were all fond of Agnes, so the blame was apportioned to him.

Just as the room was getting dark Agnes heard a foot-step outside, and Ruth opened the door softly.

"Will you see Miss Briggs, Miss Agnes?" she asked, and before Agnes could reply had ushered her in.

Little Miss Briggs was not a romantic comforter, but her face was quite pale with emotion, and tears of sympathy ran down her fat cheeks. She seated herself on the edge of the bed, and at the sight of her Agnes sat up, threw her arms about her neck, and sobbed. It was a moment of intense relief to find a comforter at all—some one young like herself—some one disposed not to ask questions or to criticise her conduct, but ready to pour out as much sympathy as she desired.

"It's dreadful, Agnes," murmured Miss Briggs, hugging her and forgetting her grand manner entirely. "It's just dreadful. We're all so sorry. Mrs. Woods and Elma met Mrs. Ashton, and she told them, and I thought I'd just come down here and see you. You poor dear, can't you stop crying at all? You look so sick!"

"Oh, Maria, I wish I had never been born!" sobbed Agnes. The buttons on Miss Briggs' jacket hurt her face, but she clung to her in spite of that.

"One does, at times," said Maria, suddenly recollecting her dignity. "*But all in vain, Agnes.* You must try to brace yourself. There's such a thing as grieving *too* much, as Heine says; and mother always declares that nothing spoils the complexion like it. Have you had any luncheon?"

"No, I couldn't eat."

"Or any tea?"

"Ruth brought me tea—I tried, but I couldn't take any."

Miss Briggs was silent. Then she fished something out of the pocket of her coat, and pushed it softly into Agnes' hand. The cold feeling of it startled her, and she stopped crying.

"What——?" she began.

"Eat it, dear, *do*!" said Miss Briggs. "It's only a stick of chocolate—not even cream—but quite good. *Do* eat just a little."

She looked so piteous, with her fat face pale with sympathy, that Agnes smiled. To please her she took a mouthful of chocolate, then another. All of a sudden she was aware that life was not entirely dark, after all. A faint sensation of physical comfort stole over her again. She dried her eyes, and drew her breath more calmly. Ruth came silently into the room with a tray.

"Some tea for Miss Briggs," she said. Maria nodded to her mysteriously, and took the tray. She poured out a cup of tea and handed it to Agnes, and filled another for herself.

It was a childish bit of hilarity, sitting there on the rumpled bed, Agnes with her face all swollen with crying, Miss Briggs with her hat pushed half off and her grand manner entirely gone. Together they ate and drank, and the black cloud of despair began to lift.

"I will leave you now, darling," said Miss Briggs, bending over her with a last embrace. "Try to go to sleep. I will write to you as soon as I get home. Elma won't be able to come to-morrow. Terence went away this morning."

"Yes, I know," said Agnes.

Miss Briggs was settling her hat at the mirror, and did not look round.

"Try to sleep to-night," she repeated, "and don't cry any more, Agnes. You'll have no skin left if you do, and pallor with spots is dreadful. You won't undo the past, even if you cry like a crocodile, as Swinburne says. Good-night, good-night."

She kissed Agnes once more, and tip-toed away.

CHAPTER XXXVI

DURING the weeks that followed Agnes was able to realise slowly all the various annoyances caused by her decision. In the first place, her aunt and Mr. Lascelles, although they declared that the "subject was closed," treated her with a marked displeasure. She could not talk to them as before, or even sit silent without feeling how they disapproved of her very presence. Yet their house was all the home she had. Then she was afraid to go out of doors lest she should meet Mrs. Ashton, who had spoken very severely indeed about her conduct. Nellie had returned to school, and Mark Bassett had gone away at once. When Maria Briggs had gone, Agnes felt her only ray of comfort was extinguished, till one day Elma came to see her. She was calm and reasonable as usual.

"Well, Agnes, I don't see why you should be making yourself so miserable *now*," she said. "'Tisn't as if you had been married, or even as if he *hadn't* been married before; and as for the fuss every one is making, it will be all forgotten in six months. Since I saw what an amount of talk people will make about a tiny thing like Herbert's ear, I've realised better how little it takes to make English people disapprove." She looked at Agnes, and went on: "Just you don't mind them, but go away for a few months, and when you come back it will be all forgotten."

"But how can I go away?" said Agnes. "I've nowhere to go."

Elma considered. "Can't you go and stay with the Briggs?"

"I could, for a fortnight, but not longer."

"Well now, Agnes, if I were you, I'd just try to get some work that would take me away."

"Oh, Elma, I've been thinking about it. But who would give me work?"

"Well, you try and see. *Anything* would be better than sitting between two old people bent on freezing you to death, *I think*," said Elma as she rose to go. "Of course I don't pretend to take your English view of things, but I'd rather go out charing than stand it."

Agnes considered the suggestion, and she wrote to Maria Briggs asking her to go and see their former schoolmistress, and find out from her if she knew of any situation that she could take. In a few days Maria replied:

"I haven't yet seen Miss Brown," she wrote; "because I have another suggestion to make first. Would you go for the winter and look after my Aunt Ellen Briggs? I spoke to you about her before, you remember. She's my father's sister, you know, and a great invalid—at least, she doesn't seem ever to die, but she's always ill. Mother wanted me to tell you about this first."

Eagerly Agnes welcomed the thought of attending to any Miss Briggs. She would get away from this dreadful circle of displeased relations, and be under no obligation to them for home and shelter, so she went to meet Miss Briggs one day, and finally arranged to go and spend the winter with her in a furnished house she was then occupying in one of the little sea-side villages about twenty miles from Little Widger. Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles were really much relieved when Agnes told them of her plan. They assured her, of course, that they wanted her to think of their house as her home.

"But considering all things," said her uncle, "it may be just as well that you should leave the neighbourhood for a time."

Clare's letters had been frequent and vituperative. First of all, after hearing of the engagement, she had apparently suffered intense chagrin. Then she wrote in a new vein, now convinced that "Agnes was so inexperienced that she would be much the better for having her to live at Owlscott for a time."

"You need not think of being jealous," she wrote, "for I never encouraged Mark Bassett in any way, and my knowledge of the world and of society would be of infinite use to you at first, brought up as you have been in utter ignorance of everything. A man of the world like Mark Bassett is apt to tire of an unformed girl like you unless she has some one to advise her. I could arrange to spend the whole of next summer with you, as you will probably have to entertain a good deal; and it would be well if I were there in early spring. A bedroom and a nice sitting-room facing south would be all I should require, and of course you will have your own carriage, as you know I was never able to walk much. The dresses I got in Vienna will be quite good enough for a country neighbourhood," and so on.

But following hard on this happy plan came a violent note. "I can scarcely write—you intolerable, miserable little girl—to tell you how ashamed I feel of your disgusting conduct. Just when you seemed about to be happily settled, and able for the first time to do something for others (*my* life has been passed in an unselfish endeavour to support myself, and to make ends meet even in my degrading position), you must go and, without rhyme or reason, fling everything away and leave us all in the mud!" A great deal of ink was splashed about the paper, and the handwriting sprawled wildly.

By the next mail she had struck a different note. "Had my experience of life been less sad, I should perhaps have taken the view of petty bigots like the Lascelles" (what this view was she did not explain); "but my own sorrows have taught me that every man's

hand is against the unfortunate. Mr. Moss, a cultivated Hebrew gentleman, who has paid me the most marked attention, even presenting me, under the very eyes of the jealous, with a magnificent necklace of valuable Eastern shells, has suddenly gone off to Berlin. No doubt he has heard some report of your behaviour (there is no gossip that women of the harem, such as the women I live with virtually are, will not stoop to); and in this way you have not only spoilt your own prospects, but have thrown another stone upon my difficult path. As a Christian, I forgive you both (Mr. M. and you); but the women of this household, particularly Madame B——, who has always been furiously jealous of me, taunt me continually, and the poison of asps is under their tongues." She added a postscript: "I hope that Hannah Raleigh may do something for you still, though one can never count on those philanthropists—nothing short of a Magdalen attracts them for a moment."

Agnes had written to Hannah Raleigh a stiff little note that expressed nothing of what she was feeling. But the older woman understood, and she wrote kindly, begging the girl to come and stay as long as she liked in Hampshire, and reminding her that if she found the situation with Miss Briggs intolerable, she had always a home there.

Agnes had heard nothing of Terence and his mother since they left England, until Elma mentioned casually one day that Terence had gone back to work, and that her Aunt Margaret was very busy again in Washington. Agnes wondered whether they had heard about the breaking off of her engagement. She longed to know, but Elma said nothing, and Mrs. Woods did not write.

It had been an uncomfortable voyage for Margaret Woods. She was ill and tired for one thing, and she watched Terence with concealed anxiety the whole time. He had every appearance of enjoying himself as usual, but she detected a false note in his cheerfulness, or thought she did, and worried over it in silence

"If I had only stayed at home this summer," she thought. "Young people are such materialists, after all—it's really the people whom they see and hear, not the absent, that they care about. He might have forgotten it all if he had not seen her. Anyway, the marriage should be over soon, and surely Terence won't think any more about her then."

In spite of these consoling arguments, she was not quite reassured. A memory of Agnes as she had seen her last, standing beside Mark Bassett with a hopeless, listless little droop of her head, like a flower wilting in the heat, made her kind heart uncomfortable. But when she remembered the girl's story and looked at her own son, the mother's selfishness arose and cried out that she was thankful.

There was amongst the passengers when they crossed, a girl—Minnie Arnold, by name—who had been introduced to them by a mutual friend before they started. Mrs. Woods looked at her with great approval—"not at all for her money," she said to herself (and this indeed was true), "but just because she's so nice." She was an attractive creature to any one who had eyes to see—out on deck before breakfast and long after dusk had fallen, tall, and fresh with the winds and spray. Her frank smile showed a row of white teeth. She seemed to breathe of high vitality, of wealth and good-humour, open-air buoyancy and enjoyment of life. She spoke the language of their own people, understood their joys, worshipped at their shrines, represented their country at its best. Her fingers were manicured, her eyes very bright; the pearls in her ears were as big as wren's eggs, her furs were deep and rich—money was simply the air that she had always breathed, and she never even considered its worth.

Once, when a man beside them who had been talking about England said of some one else, "He was a Scotchman—not English," and added as a matter of course, "*The English—how I hate 'em!*" Minnie Arnold only looked up at him and nodded and laughed. Terence,

who had been listening in silence, got up and walked away.

The day before they landed Margaret said to him, "I think, Terry, I shall ask Miss Arnold to come and see us in Washington."

Terence looked at her squarely. "Why?" he asked, opening his round eyes wide.

"Oh, because she's so nice——" began his mother.

"You *needn't*," said Terence decidedly, and turned away.

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE imagination of youth will often cover the barest circumstances with verdure as the lichens grow about the stones.

But all its power would have failed to invest the situation in which Agnes now found herself with the faintest appearance of romance.

Miss Ellen Briggs—a maiden lady of about fifty years of age—was small and fat in figure, with a flabby white face and a low voice; a person of unimpeachable character, kind and gentle, slightly interested in religion and in a few relations, chiefly occupied with the care of her own indifferent health. She was living in a small furnished villa, hired for the winter, and received Agnes in its curiously hideous sitting-room with a good deal of kindness.

“Do you find the room warm?” she inquired in her gentle, hesitating way. “I am so afraid of draughts, for I must be so careful. I would come upstairs with you, only I always get so out of breath. Mrs. Milton, the housekeeper, will show you to your room.”

Mrs. Milton, who had been standing by the half-closed door, now sidled into the room. She was a long, thin woman, with a discoloured skin and a great mouthful of ill-fitting false teeth. She seemed to make a desperate effort to swallow these whenever she spoke.

“I’ll show the young lady to ’er room. Pore dear miss, you’ll be tired to death with the journey. When I ’ad

charge of the 'Ome for the Dyin', they arrived so weak that often I was obliged to carry them in me arms into their rooms. This way, please; there's a bit of carpet torn by the door, miss, as I've never 'ad a moment for to mend this week, with the thanksgiving services and all, and the decorations for the 'arvest festival, it's taken me all me time."

Her flow of talk followed Agnes up the stairs, and she continued talking, with occasional pauses to swallow, whilst she undid the straps of her box and drew up the window-blinds.

The room was bright enough, with a large window looking out on the sea. Just below lay a little cove, having a beach lined with rattling pebbles. A slow, recurrent wave dragged them up and down with a curious persistent sound; they rolled up, and then they dropped down the shelf-like beach again with a rattle—sometimes with a shriek, sometimes with a low, musical note. On the edge of the cliff in the front of the house stood a row of tall elms, with the yellow and red leaves still left here and there. Between the coloured leaves Agnes could see the bright blue water. It was all very lovely. The air, even in October, was as mild as milk, for the golden days of the Indian summer had begun.

The first week passed very slowly. Agnes longed to be out in the mild, delicious weather; but Miss Briggs sat hour after hour in an over-heated room with every window closed, and showed a kind of pained surprise if the girl proposed going out of doors. She was very kind, invariably courteous and gentle, but her intelligence was feeble; and Agnes, who had always lived a good deal in the open air, and in company with a woman of strong mind and character like Mrs. Sorel, found the life very trying.

She had no wish to dictate to her employer, or to rule things according to her desires; but Miss Briggs was so full of little hesitations and scruples, that the only way

of getting things done at all—were it even going out for half an hour's walk—was that Agnes should propose it, decide it, and then get ready and take her out without paying much heed to the gentle vacillation that went on beforehand.

Miss Briggs requested her to undertake the house-keeping. Agnes had no experience to fall back upon, and the household was not an easy one to manage, consisting of Miss Briggs' old maid, who attended to her personally, a young house-maid, who knew very little about her work, and Mrs. Milton, who was supposed to be cook. This lady, whenever Agnes ventured on any correction, nearly over-powered her with a flow of words—always indignant.

"'Tisn't as if I wasn't accustomed to 'avin' things *most* particular" (swallowing rapidly). "When I was in the 'Ome for the Dyin' there wasn't never a drop of grease as you could 'ave lifted in a spoon from the soup—and blessin' me for kindness with their last breaths." Or, "The gentlemen in the clergy 'ouse where I was 'ousekeeper was always insistin' on 'avin' every mossel cooked by me with me own 'ands. Fast days, even, the fish was left entirely to me. The pore dear gentlemen wouldn't take notice of a trifle like gravy, just so long as I was regular at even-song." Or it would be, "As to there bein' no 'ot water for the baths this mornin', miss, I was off to 'Oly Communion at 'alf-past six, and never a moment to look at the fire—only just time to 'ave a mouthful of bacon meself before puttin' in the breakfast."

She talked on till Agnes had been routed into complete silence, and then retired, still murmuring, into her confused kitchen.

Miss Briggs was a complete stranger in the neighbourhood, and the few people who came to make her acquaintance were not encouraged to return. So most of the days were passed alone with her, and the evenings were almost absolutely uniform.

At times, the long stillness in the house, the sound, coming up from the cove below, of the recurrent wave breaking on the beach and dragging up the rounded flints after it, made Agnes quite nervous.

The room they sat in was deplorably ugly. On one wall there hung a picture of a boy and a dog—an oil-painting much too big for the room. The boy was a dropsical-looking child, with a grotesquely large head. It seemed to nod at the girl when she looked up at it.

Miss Briggs put in a good deal of hesitating work on a piece of ready-made embroidery, which she filled in every here and there with coloured beads. The selection of each bead was an occasion for more hesitation. One day, as they were sitting thus employed (for Agnes had to keep a constant watch over the bead-work too), Maria and her father arrived for the afternoon. Leaving Miss Ellen Briggs to converse with her brother, Agnes gladly escaped for a little to the garden with Maria. She was so glad to see her that the round fat face and tiny mouth seemed quite beautiful to her that day.

"Do you find her very trying?" Maria asked, nodding towards the window where her aunt was sitting.

"She's exceedingly kind to me, Maria; but it *is* tiresome sometimes."

"Of course it is, dear," said Maria; "but it is such a relief to me to know that you are here. I was always afraid I'd be sent down for another fortnight; it nearly killed me last year. You look pale, Agnes, but you never have any colour, have you? That's why you look so sad. You mustn't really mind things so much! No one here knows anything about it."

"Oh, I know that," said Agnes. "I'm very glad."

"Elma's eldest brother has been with them," Maria went on musingly. "He's quite interesting-looking, you know—more in Terence's style. Quite grown-up, too; such an American look. They're quite different from our men—don't you think so?"

"Yes, I think they are."

"Brighter," said Miss Briggs pensively. "And their boots shine so, and their hair—not always, but I mean when they *are* tidy, they're so very shiny."

"Terence was," said Agnes.

"Yes; but they're either that, or the other thing," pursued Maria. "I've seen lots of them—friends of the Woods; they've got no happy medium."

She arranged a curl, and surveyed one of her tightly gloved hands for a moment with a pensive stare. "The women have a style of their own," she went on. "Elma told me they had heard from her aunt just after they arrived. Terence had been a great deal with a Miss Arnold during the voyage. She is handsome, with heaps and heaps of money—*her pearls are historic*; and she belongs to one of the best New York families."

"Of course—*they always do!*" said Agnes. Her face had flushed a little.

Maria looked at her curiously. She was a creature of excellent good-humour, and Agnes had become invested in her eyes with the most romantic interest.

"I don't believe it meant anything, Agnes," she went on hurriedly. "No doubt he was just amusing himself—a voyage is so bad for that. That's one reason why mother won't let me go to India with my brother and his wife. She says I'm rather young for the voyage. There is so little to do, and Idleness is the mother of all the Graces, as some one says; so I suppose one thinks of nothing but frivolity—rather nice, though. Perhaps I shall go next year."

She chattered on, and Agnes stood beside her, looking at the red leaves patterned against the blue sea. She was sick at heart, and afraid to betray herself by speech.

At last Mr. Briggs came out to say they must go, and Maria took her leave, whispering to Agnes at the last moment: "If you find it *quite* unbearable, just write to me, and we'll ask you both down to stay with us, and

mother can look after her for a bit. Do cheer up, Agnes! *The past is dragon's teeth, but the future may extract them,* as I read somewhere the other day."

She was gone with a final wave of her little fat hand, and Agnes turned slowly back into the house.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

BY half-past six the windows were closed, the blinds drawn down, and all air finally excluded for the night.

Mrs. Milton brought in an evil-smelling lamp, and placed it on the table. Miss Briggs drew up her chair beside it, and began, with slow, damp, trembling fingers, to select and stitch on her beads.

The wave came and went, went and came, away down in the cove below the house. Agnes looked out of the window through a slit in the blinds, and saw a bright moon riding in a clear sky.

"*Very handsome and rich?*" she was saying to herself. "*That doesn't matter—belongs to one of the best New York families!*"

"Three green and a ruby, please," said Miss Briggs. "And would you just draw down that curtain a little closer—I feel the draught on my shoulder." Then, after a short pause, "I'll just move nearer to the fire, if you can lift the table, for I had a threatening of a stiff neck last night, and I don't want to get it worse."

She picked a bead; dropped it on the floor; Agnes picked it up for her, and she lost it again immediately.

"Never mind that one just now. I've taken a blue one instead. Did you go to the grocer's?" she asked, having at last impaled another bead.

"Yes, Miss Briggs; I went, but he had no tomatoes, so I got some apples instead."

"Ah, I'm a little afraid of apples. Did you get the Groats?"

"Yes, he had them."

"Robinson's?"

"No; I think some other kind."

"They won't be quite the same. You know I can't touch oatmeal—it makes my skin irritable at once. Do you think a pearl in the centre of this flower would do?"

"Yes, I think that would be best."

The pearl bead was found, dropped, and picked up three times before it was finally secured. "*Her pearls are historic*," Agnes murmured as she looked at it.

"If to-morrow is fine, Miss Briggs," she said, "don't you think we might go to Manley, and see Mrs. Brand?"

"Well, if I'm able for the drive; but I've been feeling my back a good deal, and I don't want it to get worse."

"Then we might go to Miss Heman's—there is such a little bit to walk."

"If only my foot is better, but it's been distinctly worse since going out yesterday. Besides, I don't like to go near Miss Heman's, as long as her parlour-maid has such a bad cold."

"But she only opens the door—perhaps not even that; the other maid may be there."

"Oh, well; but since that bad cold I had in April,—you weren't here, so you won't remember—not the one when I was able to get up, but the regular influenza, when I was in bed for a fortnight,—I'm afraid to go near any one with a cold."

Again a silence; again the beating of the wave below. Agnes looked through a chink of the blind and saw a little boat with a furled sail running down a silver ripple just under the moon's face.

Was this life? Could she pass weeks of existence like this, with the beautiful world outside? With other people occupied, living, loving. Would she not have been better to have married Mark Bassett after all?

Then her heart quickly answered, "No, no, I could not do it." She remembered Terry's face as she had last seen

it—older, finer, with some new depth of experience. It rose up between her and the moonlit sea. "*For such a man some would even dare to die.*" She turned again to look at Miss Briggs, stooping by the lamp, fingering her beads with sticky, trembling fingers. "Can I not even live a life like this for him? It's not *much* worse than dying." She smiled to herself and moved to the table.

Miss Briggs laid aside her work. "I wanted to finish it," she said, "but I can't stoop any longer. It gives me such a sharp pain in my side. Will you read aloud for a little, for my eyes are tired, and I don't want to overstrain them? I suppose we'd better go on with the book you began yesterday, but I don't care for those silly stories about love. Those proposals are so confusing. I can't quite follow them, and there are *so* many in this book."

Agnes read for half an hour. As the clock struck nine, Miss Briggs rose.

"I think I'll go to bed early to-night. I'm sure I hope I'll sleep. Last night I was awake till four."

"But you've had some exercise to-day," said Agnes, folding the canvas and picking up the scattered beads from the tablecloth.

"*Too much,*" said Miss Briggs darkly. "I've had twinges of rheumatism and toothache all day, and it's so apt to come on at night, especially if one is not asleep. See, there are two pearls under the table. I don't want to stoop, for it hurts my ear" (Agnes gave a random thought to this physical peculiarity, but failed to trace the connection), "so would you mind picking them up for me?"

Miss Briggs waited until the beads had all been collected and replaced in their box; then, slowly and painfully, she ascended the stairs, Agnes following her to her bedroom door.

"Please send me up a little lemonade," she said, "for my throat is troublesome, and I'm afraid of that tickling cough again."

At last Agnes returned, and sat down alone in the little

sitting-room. Miss Briggs had taken off the lampshade, so that the unshaded glare fell full on the portrait on the wall. The swollen head of the boy looked colossal; the dog was represented as panting, with its tongue out—always out. How Agnes wished that she had never happened to notice this! Everything looked worse than usual that evening; the thick walnut legs of the furniture were more misshapen; the mean, yet buzzing patterns on walls and carpet were more obtrusive.

She threw open the window and leant out. The soft roar of the wave came and went, rolling the rounded pebbles up and down—the labour that had been going on for a thousand years; the stars were moving across the sky; the night air was mild and rich with scents; the white cliffs glimmered under the moon; and all that life meant to her was the unbearable tedium of listening to a peevish invalid, shut up in a close room.

She wondered for a moment if love and romance were all just a beautiful dream. What chance had she ever had in life? Of what use was it to uphold a standard, as Hannah Raleigh had said, if there was no one to know or care? She made an effort, but to what end?

Now that her grandmother was dead, what creature in the world cared for her or her standard at all? The dark house, with its atmosphere of hopeless illness, was like the thought of the grave to her.

Men have died of despair, she thought. Men have died in prison, and never got out. How, in such an existence, could she ever prevent herself falling entirely? Then she thought of her Aunt Clare, "*The unlit lamp, and the ungirt loin,*" the mental and moral slackness that had never held hard to anything. She would never, she vowed to herself—she would never lead a life like that. Hers should be pure and righteous, even if it was spent, to her last hour, with the dulllest of the dull. If she died making bead cushions with Miss Briggs, she would die at least with a star in her soul.

She turned from the window and sat down again to write to her father. His letters were always very short, never more than a few lines ; but he told her that the great pleasure of his life was to hear from her. So the girl tried to write to him, making her letters as long as possible. It was very difficult, for she had the feeling that she was corresponding with an unknown person all the time.

Only when the short, sad notes came in reply, her heart was touched by the gratitude he expressed.

He had got work, which was tolerably well paid, and he seemed contented enough where he was. "It is a free life, and I can make all the money that I need. If I ever make any more, it shall be yours. Do as you please," he wrote, when he had heard of her engagement to Mark Bassett ; "I only want you to be happy." And again, when she had written about her engagement being at an end, "Do as you please, Agnes. Only be happy. Forget about me, if I give you any trouble ; but you are the only thing I care for now in the world."

She had asked him if he wanted her to come out to him. "No," he answered ; "I will never urge you to do that, unless I had a home that would be suitable for you. I'd rather know you were happy a thousand miles away." The letters gave her pleasure, for she felt that each one strengthened a little the tie between them.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE weeks passed slowly when November darkness set in. Miss Briggs very seldom ventured out at all, but one day she allowed Agnes to persuade her to go to see an old friend, a Mrs. Green, who lived in the little watering-place that was the shopping centre of the neighbourhood.

This meant a drive of some four miles in a closed carriage—even then Miss Briggs was afraid of draughts; but Agnes found some enjoyment in looking out of the carriage window at the unfamiliar landscape.

They arrived to find Mrs. Green entertaining several guests in her small drawing-room.

Outside the waves were breaking in a ridge of foam all along the sea front. The vulgar little esplanade was empty, the sea and sky all dim colour; only far off, a chance gleam of sun broke through the clouds, and touched the white cliffs that stood at the horn of the bay. Often when she looked at that lonely point, as it caught a sudden light, Agnes had a moment of consolation. It seemed like a promise of peace, away there in the distance.

Now, as she sat in the hot little overcrowded room, she could just see its gleam afar off, as she looked between the net curtains and the stem of a palm in a yellow pot, whilst the buzz of conversation hummed about her. At first Miss Briggs had almost thought of turning back, when she saw that there were other guests. "It's quite a tea-party. I'm afraid the room will be so hot. A hot room invariably makes me squeamish. But after such a long drive without

tea, I should be quite afraid of a chill." Once in the room, however, the unwonted intoxication of such society had its effect, and she sat up with a livelier expression on her pale face than Agnes had seen before.

Life with Miss Briggs had often been oppressive to the girl, but somehow that afternoon was the culmination of everything. She looked about the room from her seat in a corner, and as she drank a cup of tea, which curiously tasted of mice, she listened to the conversation going on around her.

Every one else seemed animated—even Miss Briggs was enjoying herself.

"Is it possible," thought Agnes, "that I can ever live to get out of this room? I have been here for æons already."

Conversation, which had been about the weather to begin with, now set steadily in the direction of insect life.

"Slugs," began a fat woman next to Agnes, who seemed supporting herself with difficulty in an upright position on the edge of her chair, scattering crumbs wide around her, as the sower scatters seed—"slugs are very destructive. How do you kill them?"

"I drown them," said Mrs. Green.

"I throw them at once into paraffin," said the stout woman strongly.

"I give mine to the gardener," said a mild-looking widow, who sat near the window.

"What does he do with them?" Miss Briggs asked with interest.

"*Don't ask!*" shouted the fat woman.

There was a pause, during which another cup of tea, more diluted than the last, was handed round.

Miss Briggs said to Agnes, in an agitated whisper, "I see this little cake is cocoanut. It always gives me a sick feeling at once."

"Don't eat it. Can't you leave it on your plate?" Agnes suggested.

"I've taken a whole mouthful," said Miss Briggs. "But perhaps that will not do me much harm. Where shall I put it?"

Agnes stretched out her hand, and secured the little cake, which she slipped into the pocket of her coat. Miss Briggs with terror watched the proceeding, and then helped herself to bread and butter.

A few dropping remarks on slugs had been still going on. Green fly now occupied the field, the talk finally drifting towards beetles, cockroaches—"called 'roaches' in America," said some one in the background.

The word "America" made Agnes listen. She looked away, between the window curtains, to where the sun was still striking on the pale, lonely cliff. Her thoughts flew across the intervening space, and she fancied herself sitting on that far-away, headland, with Terence beside her, the sharp air blowing on their faces, the sound of the churning waves below; the bare grassy slopes stretching far behind; the quiet, dun-coloured sky above; no one else near them—only the sea-birds wheeling overhead.

She returned to the actual with a start, as Miss Briggs muttered in her ear, "I had swallowed it before I realised what it was. There is *nothing* so bad."

"What was it?" Agnes inquired.

"*A candied cherry*," she whispered, and Agnes caught the word "appendicitis"; but just then Mrs. Green came up to speak to Miss Briggs, so that her attention was diverted for a moment from the awful possibility.

Some one in the background—the same voice that had spoken about America—was now relating an anecdote about a cardinal bird.

Agnes remembered how Margaret Woods used to describe them. She listened until the story closed with, "So we fed it on black-beetles; but it developed a raging thirst, and died in two days."

She got up then to follow Miss Briggs, feeling as if she *had* been in that room for a hundred years. Wraps,

shawls, rugs, cloaks, footwarmers—everything that could be placed in the carriage without choking them entirely—having been adjusted, they drove off at last.

"I've got quite a shiver," said Miss Briggs, "coming out of that hot room. What did you do with that cake, my dear?"

Agnes produced the little cake with a laugh. "I'll throw it out of the window now," she said; and before Miss Briggs could remonstrate, she had let down a chink of the window and tossed the fragment away.

"A gull has got it already," she said, watching with amusement.

But Miss Briggs was grave. "It's *cocoanut*," she said sadly. "How bad for the poor bird!"

The gull sailed off screeching, pursued by another one that tried to rive the indigestible morsel from him, and Agnes saw the last light fade off the headland, which became merged in the advancing mists of night.

CHAPTER XL

“**M**EASLES,” said the doctor cheerfully, “but quite a mild case.”

“*Measles!*” echoed Miss Briggs, in the tone of one who has just received the death-warrant. “*Measles!*” she repeated faintly, casting one glance at Agnes, lying back on her pillow with a strangely flushed face.

“Oh, Miss Briggs, I’m so sorry!” the girl began.

But Miss Briggs was already at the door, and did not even wait to hear what the doctor had to say. He followed her from the room, and in half an hour’s time Agnes received a note from her.

“I am so grieved that I dare not attend to you myself, but with my susceptibility to every infectious disease, it would be quite dangerous. *Complete* isolation is the only thing. I have sent for a nurse, but it is doubtful if she can come. Anyhow, Mrs. Milton and Eliza will take every care of you. Meanwhile, I am going to my sister-in-law’s. The journey in this weather is a risk, but anything is better than spreading infection; and although my knee is painful, I can get in and out of the carriage well enough with assistance. Ann I will take with me, as my throat was so troublesome last night that I am afraid of being quite laid up when I arrive at my sister-in-law’s. The tickling cough kept me awake all night, so that I am not very fit for the journey, and I have a heavy feeling in my head; but it is better to go.

“I must say good-bye for the present. Mrs. Milton will send me a daily report of how you get on, and I will

telegraph at once to let you know how I have stood the journey. If I am too tired Maria will send the message. Do not distress yourself about me. If that curious tingling sensation in my right shoulder were gone, and the oppression on my chest were less, I should be all right."

By the time Miss Briggs had departed Agnes was too ill to care what became of her. She turned her face to the wall, and closed her burning eyes. Mrs. Milton trailed into the room, every now and then proffering assistance.

"It's just about comin' out now, miss," she said, pulling up the blind all awry so that a shaft of light fell sharply across the girl's face. "The spots is as plain as on calico now. It's not much of an hillness, the doctors say, but many's the one it's carried off! When I was in the 'Ome for the Dyin', there was a death nearly an 'ole week sooner nor we expected it, owin' to the measles.

"You'll be feelin' a bit light-'eaded, miss, probably—the doctor said as you would before mornin'; so I'll just be ready to look in. 'You needn't sit up,' 'e said. 'Just give 'er some attention through the night.' So I said to Eliza as I'd just slip on me old black skirt, and me painoir, and sit by the fire in the drawin'-room with a book—a beautiful copy of the lives of the saints, as was given me by Mrs. 'Erbert, who went off that sudden at the 'Ome one day, that I 'adn't time more than to pull the bell after 'earing the death-rattle."

She had come to the side of the bed and leant over Agnes, gazing at her intently. Every now and then she swallowed, clicked her falling teeth back again, sniffed, and sighed deeply.

"You'll be 'avin a drop of the new milk now; I just brought up a sup in me own cup, when I'd finished me tea," she exclaimed.

When she next re-entered the room it was growing dusk, and she carried a guttering candle, letting the wax drip on the floor.

"See!" she said caressingly, approaching the bed. "'Ave a drop of milk, miss. Ah! there's a tea-leaf or two still floatin' on it, and some of the tea in the saucer—it's me own cup, and no mistake!"

At intervals during the long night, when Agnes woke from her short, feverish dreams, Mrs. Milton was creeping about the room. Her teeth had now mysteriously and entirely disappeared; the girl's sick fancy never managed to solve the question as to whether she had swallowed them or not. She had assumed a black bonnet as well as the "painoir" (which was yellow)—"just to keep me 'ead from the night air," she explained, as she was giving Agnes some medicine. "It's a bit of a crape bonnet as I got for the Queen's funeral—just a bugle or two and an ostrich tip; but it keeps me 'ead tidy. Now you lie down again, miss, and you'll fall asleep" (she snuffed the candle with her finger and thumb). "If you waken light-'eaded, I'll be there to attend the moment as I 'eres you stirrin. They was nearly always light in the 'ead at the 'Ome, *chantin'* at times, with the change comin' over them, and feet cold to the knees!" She heaped the bedclothes upon Agnes, stirred the fire with a loud rattle, blew out the candle by the bed, leaving a red end on the wick still smouldering, and then, with a last murmur of, "Spots is out beautiful now!" she went out of the room, leaving the door ajar, and Agnes could hear her slipping, trailing step as she took her way downstairs.

With swollen throat and aching head, burning with fever, and tossing incessantly from side to side, Agnes lay half-conscious, half-drowsy all through the night, which seemed as if it would never end.

But towards morning the fever abated, and then she fell from her short, disordered visions into a profound and blessed sleep. The grotesque image of Mrs. Milton in her yellow garment and crape bonnet failed to rouse her. She slept on, and she dreamed that she stood by the window downstairs looking out. A light, fine rain seemed to be falling all

through the sky, yet the sun was shining. She heard the click of the latch on the little wooden gate, and saw that it was Terence who entered. In her dream she saw him quite distinctly; he wore a long white waterproof coat (she had seen it before) that came down to his heels, adding to his apparent height and slenderness. His face had settled into more determined lines, and almost lost its boyish outline. Some indefinable change had passed over him, hardening and strengthening what had been so young and bright before. His cap, the collar of his coat, the edges of his hair were powdered with the fine rain. She saw in her dream, without surprise, that two red birds came flying about his head, and she asked Miss Briggs what they were.

"They are cardinal birds," she answered.

Then somehow Miss Briggs disappeared, and Agnes was standing in the doorway alone as Terence came in. She felt the little sob of joy that rose in her throat as she looked at him. "I need not hide it any more!" she thought. In her dream he bent down and took her in his arms.

She gave herself gladly to his embrace, and just for a moment she felt his cool, smooth face against her own. In an ecstasy of confidence she seemed to abandon all her fears; she mistrusted not, neither doubted any more at all. . . .

She awoke with a start, hardly realising where she was. Her fever was going away; she felt as if she had been asleep for a hundred years. She raised her head and saw that the dawn was creeping up from the sea. A round, bright, clear moon looked in upon her in an almost startling way.

In another minute Mrs. Milton came sidling into the room to give her her medicine, and assure her that she had been "sleepin' beautiful, *as calm as if it was the last sleep*. 'Ow many I've seen in the 'Ome not 'alf as peaceful as you looked an hour ago, when I was

in, in spite of the spots, miss ; they often tossed terrible at the end ! ”

She moved to the window. “ Just ’ear the birds, miss, singin’ already, and March just begun ! ”

“ Are they red birds ? ” Agnes asked vaguely. She was half asleep once more.

“ *Black* birds, miss—don’t you be wanderin’ now ! I’ll go down and light the fire an’ make you a cup of tea. There’s nothin’ like it for bringin’ on the spots.” She trailed away, and Agnes fell asleep again, but this time in her dreams Terence came no more.

CHAPTER XLI

AGNES was a little better.

"The spots 'ave gone in rather suddin', tho'," said Mrs. Milton, shaking her head as she looked at her. "The patient as was carried off by them in the 'Ome, took ill on the Thursday, miss, an' by the Saturday night she 'adn't a spot left—*'opeless* after that, settled on the lungs. Why, you're as white as plaster this mornin'!"

"I'm very glad," said Agnes wearily.

"Glad just now; but if them spots is settled on your lungs, miss, you'll wish them back on your face!"

"But the doctor said I was better."

"Much 'e knows about measles!" retorted Mrs. Milton, moving to the window and giving a swipe to the dust on the toilet-table with her dirty apron. "Much any of them knows about anything! When I was in the 'Ome (the dyin' blessin' me with their last breaths!) many's the long name I've 'eard the doctors give to the diseases, but they never cured none of them, exceptin' those as wasn't appointed to die. They just think, because they know the Latin names of every bit of your body, as they knows also all that's goin' on inside of it. Now, I *suppose* I'll 'ave to give you the chicken tea as is ordered; but by the looks of you, a nice mouthful of bacon on a bit of toast is what would do you more good. Oh, there's a letter for you, miss, as came an hour ago; but I thought as I wouldn't disturb you by bringing it up."

The letter was a note from Miss Briggs, full of kindness,

hoping to hear that Agnes was much better, and that Mrs. Milton and Eliza took good care of her.

"Your aunt came to see me yesterday," she wrote. "I was feeling extremely unwell, as the queer sensation of icy coldness in the feet and hands still continues; but I was able to see her for a short time. She had driven in from Little Widger (*I should never have ventured on such a long drive, even in a closed carriage, in this treacherous spring weather*), but she seemed none the worse. She brought with her a Miss Raleigh—also a cousin, I think—a most agreeable person, who had suffered at times from the same feelings of intense fatigue as I do. Miss Raleigh at once proposed that she should come and remain with you, until you are well enough for a little change. I was delighted by the proposal, as I don't feel it would be right in my state of health to expose myself to infection; and yet I should like you to have some one with you at present (measles are not by any means confined to the *young*). But she says she *has had it*—'long ago,' she says. 'You may take it twice,' I told her. She said she would risk that, so I have written to Mrs. Milton to prepare my room for her, and you may expect to see her by Thursday afternoon. I won't write more, as I have such a painful feeling in my throat and head that I must go and lie down.

"P.S. (added). My throat is decidedly inflamed. If it does not improve I must go to bed. Mrs. Briggs is kind, and I *think* Maria means well; but they have little sympathy with illness, both being so robust."

"Is Cousin Hannah really coming? Oh, can it be true?" thought Agnes.

She sat up in bed and looked about the room. The sun was pouring in at the window; the birds were singing; some of the branches had green buds on them already; the sea was blue. All the sickness and misery of the last four days and nights began to recede into the past. She was better; she was not going to be left alone

for three weeks with Mrs. Milton—with all the weariness of convalescence to be endured in solitude. Then she heard a carriage coming up the hill, and wondered if it could be her cousin already. She slipped out of bed, wrapped a dressing-gown about her, and took three trembling steps to the window.

It was not her cousin though, only a carriage containing some officers on their way to inspect the coastguard station.

Two fat men with red faces, one of them wearing a cocked hat, occupied the front seat. Opposite to them sat a young man, with a pale, clear-cut face. His sword lay across his knees; he was smiling at something one of the fat senior officers was saying. The carriage moved on out of sight. Agnes stumbled back to bed. None of the men had even noticed the small white face looking down at them from the window, but she had carried back a quick impression of pleasure, of life and interest. The alert look of the young man's figure and the poise of his head had reminded her of Terence. "After all," she thought as she lay down again, "I'm young, and he is alive, and perhaps the world is not such a bad place as I thought!"

"Did you ring, miss?" said Mrs. Milton, entering at this moment, with a bang that made the windows rattle. Her cap was all awry, and her face flushed. She never paused to hear what Agnes replied, but began on a low note, her voice rising with every word.

"It's not as if I hadn't nursed you meself, and me with my experience, as I said to the doctor. 'Doctor,' sez I, 'I've closed the heyces of over eighty with me own 'ands, and instructions as to gettin' rooms ready! for a lady as wasn't afraid of infection, and me in and hout, and never a thought of infection—just poured them disinfectants an' sanitas stuff on the geranium beds this mornin'! I don't 'old with none of them notions as to germs amon'st 'armless dust, and rubbidge of that sort; and many a deathbed as I've attended, I never knew none the better of that nonsense.

'Hall the disinfectants in creation won't keep you from your coffin for an *hour*,' sez I to 'im, 'if your distinct time's arrived.' And this lady comin' by the afternoon train, Miss Briggs says; an 'ot supper for er'—and Eliza wantin' out, and all me own arrangements made for evensong!"

In spite of Agnes' efforts to soothe her, the torrent of words flowed on for some time. It was only arrested by Eliza summoning her to assist in preparing Miss Raleigh's room.

Agnes had fallen asleep, and wakened when it was nearly dark. She heard some one open the door quietly, not with Mrs. Milton's usual bang. A soft voice said, "Well, darling, are you better?" and half asleep, half sobbing with joy, she sat up in bed calling, "Oh, Cousin Hannah, have you really come to take care of me!"

What a delightful evening followed! Every one seemed in good humour again—even Mrs. Milton came in in her black bonnet to say, "I'm hoff to the church service after all, miss. '*After your week of nursing*,' she says, '*you'll be needin' a rest*;' and so I am! and in case as there should be any one like the doctor's wife in church, I've changed me skirt too, as if one couldn't even attend an 'oly service without that rubbidge about infection in the very church, miss, speakin' of germs at the steps of the altar! That's not religion to my mind! As if measles was the plague!" She swept from the room in high good humour.

Miss Raleigh came softly in and sat by the fire and talked, Agnes lay looking at her kind face, afraid to go to sleep again, lest she should waken and find it all a dream.

"What shall I do when I am better, Cousin Hannah?" she said at length. "Miss Briggs is going abroad with a friend in May; she won't want me any more."

"Your Aunt Caroline is very feeble now. She is much the better for having some one with her."

Agnes covered her face with her thin hands. "Oh, I couldn't go back to live there," she said. "I couldn't bear to see—him."

Mark Bassett's name had never crossed her lips since she had left Little Widger. She simply could not utter it.

"I know. Perhaps you are better not to go back there for some time, dear."

"Oh, Cousin Hannah, I have been so wicked; I hate myself for it. I think I can never be happy again!"

"*Never* is a long time, darling!"

Agnes glanced up and saw the kindly smile upon her face. She held out a thin little hand to her cousin. "Oh, you don't think I've been so *very* bad as Uncle Timothy and Aunt Caroline do!"

"Neither Uncle Timothy, nor Aunt Caroline, nor I, nor any one else in the world can judge of that; you know your own heart best, Agnes."

"He was very angry," said Agnes.

"Naturally; any man would have been angry."

"It made him very unhappy."

"It will do him good," said Miss Raleigh, in her rich tone of conviction.

Agnes laughed—a weak, sick laugh, but a happy one. "Then you don't think that if you had liked me before——" She paused, and then began again. "If you were a person who had liked me a little before, Cousin Hannah, that you would despise me for ever, just because of that?"

"I think that if I were a person who had liked you a little before," began Miss Raleigh, rising and bending over her with a smile, "I would go on liking you just the same, but I'd think no more about either of them at present."

"I don't; I won't; only now and then I can't help it," said Agnes. She looked up from where she lay, with her face as white as her pillow. "A beautiful young sailor passed in a carriage this afternoon, and he looked somehow like him; he held his head in the same way, and his sword was across his knees, and he looked so nice and trim and *young*, Cousin Hannah."

After a pause she added, " Do American soldiers wear red or blue or grey clothes ? "

" You must ask your young American friend, Agnes. I'm so ignorant, I don't know ; but I'm sure they look very well in them, whatever they wear ! " said Miss Raleigh.

She went out of the room, leaving Agnes alone, looking at the streaks of firelight and shadow on the wall. She was saying over to herself the verse that Margaret Woods used to sing—

My ornaments are arms, my trade is war ;
and fell asleep with the last line ringing in her head—

Some day may find
My fate more kind,
Some night kiss thee.

CHAPTER XLII

"**I** *CAN'T* go back to stay at Little Widger," Agnes repeated, as she sat beside her cousin on one of the long spring afternoons when she first was allowed to go downstairs.

"Don't begin to make plans yet, Agnes," said Miss Raleigh. "There is plenty of time for that. You can come home with me, and settle what you are going to do later on."

But this was no real solution of the difficulty, and the girl brooded over the thought of what she could do in a way that her cousin knew nothing of. She realised that it would be necessary for her to return to Little Widger, for a time at least, as Mrs. Lascelles wrote that she expected her, as soon as she was well enough to stand the little journey. It might be possible to live there for a few weeks, but to settle down again and make it her home was what she could never do.

Meanwhile the spring days passed pleasantly, for Miss Raleigh had the guiding faculty that makes a good house-keeper, and was able to soothe even Mrs. Milton's temper, so all went smoothly.

Agnes and her cousin sat for hours on fine days in the sunny corner by the garden door, listening to the sound of the waves breaking on the beach below.

As the girl grew stronger they walked together on the road that ran above the cliffs. Their solitude, meanwhile, was unbroken, for nothing would have tempted Miss Briggs

to risk a return to the infected dwelling. She wrote that she had given up all thoughts of coming back at all—"as between blankets and carpets, and those sheep-skin rugs which must be such traps for infection, even all ordinary precautions may prove useless."

It was delightful to Agnes to have an intelligent companion again, after nearly six months spent in the society of Miss Briggs; though her heart smote her a little when she heard that the poor lady was laid up in her sister-in-law's house.

For several weeks at that time the girl had received no letter from her father. When one did arrive at last, she opened it expecting the same brief, inexpressive note that he usually sent to her.

But this letter was longer, and the handwriting was less legible. He began by telling her that he had been very ill. "I have nothing to live for," he wrote; "and yet, strangely, I desire to live as long as I may. I have made enough of money to stay on here quietly, even if I stop my work; but I will go on with it as long as possible, for I want to be able to leave you a little, Agnes. I had thought that perhaps some day I might have gone to a place, in the same part of the country, but where it would have been possible for you to live with me; but that was only a dream. I should never really have wanted you to spoil your life for me. I only want you to be happy," he added, as he had often done before.

After she had read the letter, Agnes gave it to her cousin.

Miss Raleigh looked up at her when she had finished reading it. "Poor Austin!" she said, in her low, rich voice; she looked away out to the distant sea, shimmering blue, with the pale spring sky above it, and her eyes filled with tears. "I wish I could have gone to him!" she said.

Agnes sat up, holding the letter in her hand. "I can

go, Cousin Hannah. Don't you think I could help him ? I could nurse him, at least."

"It's a long way, child, and you are very young to go to such a lonely place."

"If it was your father who was ill, would you go, Cousin Hannah ?"

"I'm not quite sure, Agnes ; it is a little different from an ordinary case."

"Oh, but so much worse !" cried the girl. Her large black eyes had the tragic look in them that always returned when she spoke of her father. "Think of what his life has been. He has never had anything all those years. I will go and try to help him now."

Miss Raleigh was silent. Agnes watched her face. She said nothing, but the girl saw that her decision was favourable.

She would not encourage the idea at once, though. Knowing how the Lascelles would disapprove, she recommended Agnes to discuss it first with them, when she returned to Little Widger.

Agnes persuaded her to come back there too, so that she might help to break the news of the projected journey to the old people.

The last three weeks had been so pleasant that the girl felt almost sorry when the time came for them to leave. Mrs. Milton's bonnet quivered with emotion as she bade them good-bye. The days and nights of sickness were forgotten, as they drove away from the little house, and heard for the last time the strange rattle of the flints dragged up by the waves in the cove below.

At first Mr. and Mrs. Lascelles opposed the idea of Agnes going out to join her father so strongly that she nearly gave it up altogether ; but little by little Hannah Raleigh managed to accustom them to the thought.

"Of course, Mrs. Woods would meet you and look after

you, during your two days in New York," Mr. Lascelles said. "Indeed, I feel certain that her kindness may be depended on."

"She's not in New York, Uncle Timothy; she's in Washington," said Agnes.

"Washington, is it? Ah, well, I suppose there is a considerable difference; but doubtless she will be able to arrange to meet you even from Washington."

Agnes said no more to him, but she said to Hannah Raleigh afterwards: "Please don't suggest anything about Mrs. Woods taking care of me, Cousin Hannah!"

"Why, Agnes, I thought you were so fond of her!"

"I was—I am," stammered the girl. "But I heard something—I found out that she felt differently about me, when she knew about my father." Her face grew red, and she squeezed Miss Raleigh's hand hard as she spoke. "It's not as if it were only *she*," Agnes went on. "People are like that always, who have sons, aren't they?"

"Oh, Agnes, I understand," said Miss Raleigh. "Certainly I will say no more about it."

Shortly afterwards Mrs. Lascelles heard that Elma Woods and her mother were going to America, and that they had offered to take Agnes across with them. Thus the greatest objection was laid to rest, and it was finally settled that she should sail with the Woods in a fortnight's time.

Since her return to Little Widger the girl had avoided the very roads that led to Owlscott. She had never mentioned Mark Bassett's name, and had hoped that she might avoid another meeting with him. But one evening, as she was walking back to the parsonage, they met face to face.

It had been a very wet day, when the roads were muddy, and every cart-rut full of water. Agnes had gone to one of the farmhouses to inquire for a sick person, and now was hurrying home as fast as she could. She was walking with bent head, as the wind was blowing straight in her

face, so that she did not see who it was until he was quite close to her.

Then she lost her presence of mind altogether, and stood still, the wind, with a sudden buffet, blowing off the little cap she wore.

Mark Bassett too stood still. He lifted up the cap and handed it to her, looking straight into her face without saying a word.

Her white face and dark hair wet with rain, her little figure limp and soaked, made her piteous enough, almost like the sad-looking child she had been when he saw her first.

"Thank you," said Agnes, taking her cap from him. She was so bewildered that she held it in her hand, letting the rain pelt down on her uncovered head.

Mark stood and looked at her, and then said gently, with a sudden kindness in his voice, "Oh, child, put on your hat!"

Agnes obeyed him, and then held out her hand to him. He seemed less terrible than she had supposed; the choking sensation in her throat began to subside.

"I hear you are going away to America?" he began.

"Yes," said Agnes. "My father is ill."

"I wish I could help you!" he said.

They stood for an awkward minute in silence again; then the hard expression returned to his face. "I hope you will have a pleasant journey. Good-bye," he said, lifting his cap and turning away.

Agnes stood motionless. When she had heard his footsteps die away she turned to look behind, but he was gone out of sight. She walked slowly back to the house, heedless of the falling rain, forgetting all about everything else—seeing again the man's dark, handsome face, that she had once hated so much, realising more than ever how shameful and foolish her own conduct had been, and wondering how she had ever supposed that she could marry him.

She shivered all over with pained excitement, unconscious of her soaked dress and of the lateness of the hour. "*But my heart is free again !*" she said to herself. "I'll never think about marriage again as long as I live. I will be like Cousin Hannah, and when I hear that Terence has married the girl with the pearls as big as ostrich eggs, I'll try very hard to admire her if we ever meet !"

CHAPTER XLIII

“O H, Elma, don't leave me ! What shall I do amongst all these bells and things ? I don't want a waiter or a telephone, or ice, or anything !” Agnes stood in her bedroom in the New York hotel, looking about her in bewilderment. Elma stopped by the door.

“ You just go to bed and fall asleep, and you'll be all right. *I'm* thankful to think of wakening in New York again, I can tell you ! ”

Agnes thought that Elma had become more American than ever since they arrived an hour before. As an aquatic bird that has been too long on land pauses for a moment on the brink and then launches gladly out into the water—a new creature again, preening itself and splashing in delight—she had plunged into her familiar atmosphere. The crowded streets, the over-heated hotel, the high, continuous clang of voices all around them, seemed to wake her up, and she laughed and chattered in a way she had never done in England.

Agnes felt forlorn and very much a stranger, for friends came in to see the Woods as soon as they arrived, and she was necessarily left out of their talk. Her head wheeled with the noise and the lights and the shifting, chattering, swaying crowd of people that filled the rooms and corridors. At last she had gone up to her room and Elma was about to leave her, but the strangeness of everything was oppressive. She felt as if she must be dreaming.

“ Have I still got measles, and is this all a nightmare ? ” she thought. Women with white necks covered with jewels,

in velvet gowns and plumed hats: strange-looking men, hurrying servants, ringing bells, palms, scents, flowers, gilding, hot air, groups of people passing and repassing in endless succession, forming in groups and dissolving again about the huge corridors—the whole scene seethed in her tired brain, and she could scarcely believe that only a fortnight before she had stood by her window at Little Widger, looking into the profound stillness of the moorland night, hearing the clock from the old tower slowly striking ten.

She sat by the toilet-table, not looking in the glass, leaning her head on her hand. Elma knocked at the door and came in again, bright and alert, looking as if she were prepared to sit up all night.

"You're not undressed!" she said gaily. "That's all right. Terence wants to speak to you. He got me on the telephone. He'll be back in ten minutes and you must speak to him yourself. I'm just *crazy* with enjoyment to-night. It's worth while having been so long in Europe to get home!" She paused, holding the box of candy that she carried towards Agnes. "Won't you have any? You look sick, Agnes. I suppose it all feels strange enough to you, but isn't it *delicious*?" The word rolled round in her mouth, it was spoken with so much gusto.

"It's your home, you see, Elma. I can't feel like that yet."

"I should rather think it *was*," said Elma, scrunching another sweetmeat; "and the best home in the world, too! I wish you were going to stay for a bit, Agnes, and not go straight on."

"Oh, I must go on. My father is ill, you know."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Elma. "I'm going out to buy a hat the very first thing to-morrow morning."

"Aren't you tired?"

Elma laughed. "I'm only just beginning to feel alive again," she said, with a thrill in her voice that Agnes had never heard before. "Look out, Agnes; one is alive here, you see."

She pulled up the blind, and for a minute they stood looking down as if from a high cliff upon the roaring lighted streets below. High above them, advertisements winked and flashed from the top of towering buildings. Down below, the carriages, the crowds of scurrying people, no bigger than little ants, went to and fro. Every conceivable bell and clock, horn and hooter seemed sounding and whirring at once. Between the houses here and there, as through the rifts in a cañon, there were glimpses of the silent, unlit sky.

"Oh, it's tremendous!" said Agnes.

Elma laughed.

"You see, don't you, that people in New York have more to do than make a fuss about a trifle like Herbert's ear!" she said. "A month in America would give them something else to talk about, as I told Maria Briggs. Come along now and speak to Terence, Agnes!"

"Agnes, is it you?"

"Yes," said Agnes.

She held the little tube in her hand, which shook so that she could scarcely hear. The sound of Terry's voice, coming close to her from such a distance, made her heart beat fast.

"Elma says you pass through Washington. When do you arrive?"

"It's all right," called Agnes. "I've arranged about staying a night there with some one your aunt knows."

"When do you arrive?"

"I shall be all right, thank you. I don't need any one to meet me."

"I didn't ask if you wanted any one to meet you. I asked when you arrived."

"I don't know," she called desperately, and hung up the telephone.

Elma came into her room again in a few minutes.

"Terence is going to meet you, I suppose," she said.

"Well, perhaps it is better that he should. You might feel strange by yourself, though this country is so much easier to get about in than England."

Agnes did not contradict this fond delusion. She had already heard it many times as they struggled with boxes on the landing-stages.

She went to bed and fell asleep at first, only to waken with a start, trying to recollect where she was. It all came back to her, as she lay and listened to the distant shrieks of the elevated railway and the jangle of traffic from below. What a great, raw, roaring place; she felt as if she might so easily slip and be lost in it, caught in its vortex, crushed in its jaws. Oh, by what a slender thread her safety hung there—so far away, going to a father who was almost unknown to her! She had never felt so alone before. And England! Her childhood had been unhappy in a shadowed home, but she had loved her own country with a child's unquestioning faith. Were there ever any men like the great Englishmen of old? Drake and Raleigh and others belonging to that southern part of it that had been her home? How she had loved the country she knew! The woods and the fields had given her an unceasing joy. Perhaps her sense of separation from other people had made her love it the more dearly—and now she had left it all! The close green orchards at Ponde, pierced by spears of summer light, where buttercups grew among the deep grass; the little old houses reflected in the river; the ships, and the breath that came up from the sea. Again she stood on the hill above Little Widger, and saw the slope of the moor unbroken by any trees, grave and gentle against the cold night sky. Or she stood in the narrow lane where the long branches of the nut-trees nearly met overhead, and a golden moon showed in spangles between the leaves. Or, again, she walked in the wood at Owlscott with Terry, saw the long sprays of young holly glisten in the moonlight, felt the still, scented, frost-bound air upon her face, and the sweet secrets of the woods all about

them. Again she stood by the churchyard wall, the elms like tall columns along the side, and saw the glint of blue and purple between the pillared stems where the crumpled country lay so far below. She knew the words upon the stone that they had read together :

IT : WAS : THE : DESIRE :
OF : HER : WHO : LIETH :
HERE : UNTIL : THE :
RESURRECTION : THAT :
HER : BONES : SHOULD :
NOT : BE : MOVED.

Ah, no wonder the woman had desired that ! Then suddenly Agnes remembered how Terry had looked at her as he quoted the words, "*Forget also thine own people and thy father's house.*"

The jangle which had almost ceased for a while grew loud and shrill again. She saw the light beginning to pierce the blinds, and, rising unrefreshed, she crept to the window to look at a clear morning dawning above the ludicrous buildings that stress of business had piled together in the congested city. Then, overpowered with weariness, she went back to bed and fell sound asleep at last.

CHAPTER XLIV

" I HAVE been to the station," said Terence, " just three times this afternoon. It would have saved me a good deal of trouble if you had told me when you meant to arrive."

" I didn't want you to know," said Agnes. In spite of herself, she smiled.

" So I supposed. Get in, please. Your luggage is all right."

" Does the man know where to go to ? " she began.

" Home," said Terence to the coachman, as he jumped into the carriage.

" But I am going to a hotel where your aunt's cousin——"

" Oh, yes, I know all about that. Elma told me. Only it happens you are coming to us for the night."

" Indeed I am not," said Agnes.

Terence smiled. " My mother is waiting for you, and unless you jump out when we're going at full speed—which might be dangerous—you'll see her in two minutes."

Margaret Woods was standing at the door, kind and beautiful, it seemed, as she had been on the night that Agnes saw her first. She caught the girl up and kissed her with just the same tenderness. Agnes looked about her when Margaret had left her alone. After the hot, dusty journey, it felt like paradise to sit in a cool, shaded room and rest. The noise of the train had given her a racking headache ; her throat was parched, her eyes smarted from the dust and glare. She had been amongst

strange people all day, and here was home at last, it seemed. What a beautiful city it was! The street she looked into was lined with trees, whose waving branches were still a new green. A smell of magnolia blossom perfumed the air. There was a cheerful stir of life out of doors, but not the racket she had heard in New York. To her eyes, wearied with the grime of the journey, everything looked as if freshly washed and clean and beautiful. Every sound was pleasant, the people in the streets looked alert and happy. She lay back in a big armchair and closed her eyes, allowing herself for a little to rest and forget her troubles. Then the door opened and Terence came in.

Agnes sat up, remembering everything again.

"Has mother gone out and left you alone?" he said—then came and sat down beside her. "Do you know that we heard all about things before you left home?"

"I suppose Elma told you?"

Terence held out his hand. "Will you stay here now you've come to us, Agnes? Can't you promise that?"

Agnes kept her eyes downcast. She took no notice of his outstretched hand. "It is very kind of your mother to have me here," she began.

Terry gave an impatient exclamation, jumped up, and began to walk up and down the room.

"Come and sit down," said Agnes, "and let me talk to you."

"I don't want to hear a lot of nonsense. I only want you to say one word."

"I will say nothing at all unless you come and listen to me quietly," said Agnes.

She looked at him gravely, and spoke in a way that Terence had never heard her do before. He came and sat down opposite to her, his bright eyes fixed upon her face, his mouth quivering a little as she spoke.

"It was all a miserable mistake about Captain Bassett,"

she said. "I never cared about him at all. I thought things would be easier, and he was kind; but I couldn't do it. Nothing in the world can make me forget how ashamed I have been——"

"I don't wonder," Terry began indignantly.

"But," Agnes went on, "I know what your mother feels about me—about my father's history, and all that." Terence would have interrupted her, but she went on: "She is dear and beautiful and kind, and if I had been any one else she would have loved me."

"She does love you, Agnes," he began eagerly. Then, seeing the expression on the girl's face, he added, "Hang it all, what does it matter whether she does or not? *I do*, anyway." He would have taken her hand, but Agnes drew it away.

"It matters to me," she said. "I couldn't bear to hurt her like that, to have her feel that I was a curse——" She stopped, her voice trembling.

"How can you use such a word, Agnes! As if my mother ever thought of such a thing!"

"I'll tell you how I came to know," said Agnes. Then she told him about the letter. "Those were the words that she used," she said. "I remember every one of them."

"*Damn!*" said Terry.

He sat silent before her, and for a moment, even in her distress, Agnes could have laughed. Before he had broken the silence, Mrs. Woods came in. She looked at them for a moment as if she wondered what they had been saying, and then took Agnes to her own room, telling her that she must rest till dinner-time.

That evening, when Margaret said good-night to the girl, she turned a little away so that Agnes could not see her face, and said gently, "If anything happens—if your father gets worse, or if you are in any difficulty—will you let us know, dear?"

"Yes, thank you, I will let you know how I get on," said Agnes. Her voice was cold and she hardened her

heart. "It is only for Terry's sake that she is so kind to me," she thought.

Margaret went away, closing the door softly.

"I'd almost rather be back again with Miss Briggs," thought Agnes, "counting beads and hearing about her tickling cough. How could I go so far away? Strangers are *just strangers*. Terence and his mother were happy in their own world, and I am all alone outside. And what will it be like down in the south, if father is very ill and I am alone? I wish I had stayed with Miss Briggs! She was so safe, at least; she was fond of me."

In the drawing-room, which was almost dark, with only one light burning at the end of it, Terence stood by the open window with his hands in his pockets, gazing out at the green trees and the moon which appeared so dim beside the insistent glitter of the lights in the streets. The scent of magnolia blossom came floating into the room, and the hum of traffic sounded cheerful in the mild night air.

Mrs. Woods came in and stood beside Terence in silence for a minute. He did not move or turn his face. She leant her chin on his shoulder for a moment.

"Terry," she said, "if it's been my fault, I'm going to make up for it now!"

"You can't," said Terence, without moving at her caress. "She knows what you feel about it. She saw some odious letter or other that you had written to Aunt Mary by some mistake."

"Oh—oh—Terence, how dreadful!" She sat down, astonished. "How could Mary be so foolish? One ought never to write things like that."

Terence explained the circumstances to her. "So you see," he added coldly, "you just managed to let her know exactly what you felt, as you could never have done had you intended to tell her."

"You've no right to speak to me like that, Terry—as if I had tried to hurt you. I love Agnes—you know I do!"

" Oh yes—women's kind of love ! "

" Terence, I do love her. But think what her father——"

" Though her father had murdered mine I should feel just the same to her ! "

" But how can I bear that you should bring a thing like that into your life ? "

" I don't bring it into my life. I'm going to try to take it out of hers."

" If it had been anything else ; but the whole family——"

Terence knelt down beside her chair.

" Mother," he said, " it's a nasty thing to turn and quote people's own words against them, but how have you brought me up ? Haven't you told me that it did not matter who the girl was, so long as she was the right sort, and the only woman in the world for me ? "

" I have—I have ! But all mothers say the same ! "

" Then all mothers are liars, if they don't live up to it."

" Give me a little time, Terry. Perhaps I'll take it better after a bit, when I have had time to think round about it, and the father has receded a little into the background. At present I see him full to the front in convict's dress, and with every eye upon him—Agnes just a pretty shadow in the background. Oh, what a white-faced, miserable child she was that night we first saw her, and how I wanted to make her smile ! "

Next morning Agnes only had time to eat a hurried breakfast before she started. It was a brilliant morning—the world not yet awake in the half-empty streets. There was a twitter of birds in the air, a scent of green leaves and blossoms everywhere. Margaret had come in her dressing-gown to bid the girl good-bye. Just as she kissed her, she whispered in her ear :

" I dreamt last night that I had a daughter of my own, Agnes. *She looked just like you, and I loved her with all my heart.*" She winked the sudden tears from her eyes, and kissed the girl again as she hurried her away.

Agnes drove with Terence through the happy morning.

She saw the wide clean streets, the white buildings standing amidst the budding trees, and it seemed to her like a city in a fairy-tale. Terence was very silent. He hardly spoke at all until she had got into the train. Then he stood beside the carriage-window in silence. Just before the train started Agnes looked out. It was a lovely morning. She was young, and even then, for the moment at least, she was happy. She smiled a little and said :

"If I *had* to live in America, I should like to live in Washington. Good-bye !"

She had just time to see the eager look of pleasure that leapt into his face, when the train steamed away.

She threw herself back in her seat and closed her eyes. Her heart was beating quickly. She still felt the clasp of Terry's hand on her own.

"Whatever happens I am glad that I came," she thought. "That was one of the perfect pieces of life—just to drive along those lovely streets with him. Even a little bit like that will be a treasure for my heart, and will keep me from becoming *quite* like Miss Briggs."

The rocking of the train made her drowsy, and after a glance or two at the landscape as they rushed through fertile country into forests and broken ground, past small townships and strange wooden villages, she fell into a sleep in which the noise of the clanking engine mixed curiously with the voice of Miss Briggs, saying :

"A gold bead, please, two green and a ruby. Close the window, please ; I am afraid of a draught upon my neck."

CHAPTER XLV

ON the morning of her second day in the train, Agnes had got up early. She had a confused vision of the two nights that she had spent on the journey, when now and then she had wakened to look out as the train stopped at lonely stations.

Now the heat seemed to be increasing every hour. The train went rocking on, past endless stretches of broken country, through woods and thickets; beside green rivers, on whose banks grew slender trees covered with pink blossom, reflected in the green water beneath; past broken-down cabins clustered about the track; where black people in gaudy clothing gazed at the train; through endless woods that gradually melted into dark swamps where water glittered under the tall, matted trees, and lean white cows, knee deep in the pools, were eating the underbrush.

At last the train ran slow, and finally drew up amongst some tumble-down houses. "Is this the place—*really*?" Agnes asked so piteously that the conductor laughed.

"And a queer place it is, miss," he said. "Where a stranger may get his money disposed of for him, and be found behind a fence next morning with his throat cut, any day of the week."

He laughed again cheerfully, and the negro porter grinned white from ear to ear.

They had placed a high wooden stool on the ground, and Agnes with some difficulty climbed on to it, and jumped down. Her luggage was handed out by the

grinning black boy, and then the train drifted slowly on.

She looked up with a wild impulse to call to the conductor to stop and take her on again, but it was too late. Then she looked around, hoping to see her father. He was not there. The only figures were two negroes standing smiling at her, and a fat woman, who had also dismounted from the train, accompanied by a small boy carrying a little wicker cage, into which had been crammed a large green parrot. The bird was so much too big for the cage that it had the unhappy effect of sitting on its own tail with its head pressing against the roof. Agnes followed the woman up the platform, which was merely a space of trampled mud.

Two old railway carriages set on end were marked "Coloured Waiting-Room," and "White Waiting-Room," respectively.

The fat woman took her stand by the door of the white waiting-room, and gazed fixedly at the girl as she came up the platform.

"Perhaps you could tell me where the hotel is?" Agnes inquired.

The woman grunted, and without moving an inch replied, "The hotel's just across the road there."

Agnes looked at the motley collection of wooden houses. One had the word "Saloon" painted on it; another had a balcony from which hung a board, bearing the one word "Pool."

She could now see, what she had failed to observe at first, that there were two or three small groups of men standing by the sidewalks, or squatting about in doorways. There seemed to be no women, neither did the men appear occupied in any way. They simply stood or squatted in listless attitudes; now and then one of them would saunter off and disappear within one of the wooden houses.

After the train had glided out of sight there was

no sign of life left, except some huge, filthy black pigs routing about the bit of waste land beside the sheds. A car, drawn by one tiny old mule, came crawling along the track, moving at a snail's pace. The driver had hitched the reins to a nail in the roof; he lay back with folded arms, his hat tilted over his eyes, while the little mule, on thin, trembling legs, dragged the heavy car along by almost imperceptible degrees.

Agnes clutched her travelling-bag, and made her way across the track to the house marked "Saloon."

Emerging into the sunshine, she realised for the first time how hot it was, and how dreadfully she was alone. The heat rose up from the burning ground and struck her in the face. She had, as she picked her way along the broken wooden causeway, a sense of loneliness that was terrifying—the feeling that makes a small child suddenly stand still and howl, because its nurse has gone out of sight. Men, idle yet alert, glanced at her with suspicion as she passed, but no one moved or spoke.

She reached the house that had been pointed out to her, and ascended to the front verandah by means of several broken wooden steps.

At a side window there stood a young woman with a much-curled head of hair, decorated with paste combs. A tall, fat negro, his face marked by smallpox, was kneeling on the verandah, blacking the boots of a white man.

The white man was lean and sodden-looking, with an unshaven face and a bleared, rakish eye. He wore bright blue socks and his shoes were very new; otherwise his clothes were shabby to a degree. He sat tilted back in the high chair, and held up his foot to the negro, whilst he pared his finger-nails with a pen-knife.

As Agnes came up he stared, but said nothing. She turned to a bull-necked man who was leaning on the fence watching the boot-blackening.

"Is this the hotel?" she asked timidly.

The man eyed her without moving. "Yes, this is the hotel, right enough."

"Could I speak to the proprietor?" she asked again.

"Mrs. Jenks will be round about the yard somewhere," he replied. "She'll be out presently, if you take a chair." He indicated a row of dirty wooden chairs in front of the verandah.

Agnes went and sat down, thankful to be out of the glare of the sun for a little.

The man whose boots had been polished now called for a drink, and when the negro brought it to him, he drank off the whole without a breath, wiped his mouth with his hand, and then, with a visible effort, got out of the chair and walked away, with something between a swagger and a stagger in his gait.

The bull-necked man with the leathern face, who all this time had been leaning on the fence, watching in silence, now stood up. He uttered one word. Agnes did not hear what it was; but the black and he exchanged glances for an instant; they both waited until the other man was out of sight, and then turned silently away in different directions.

Agnes stopped the negro as he was about to enter the house, and asked him again if she could speak to Mrs. Jenks.

He eyed her doubtfully, and then said he would go and see.

She felt afraid to penetrate the house alone, for in the room behind her she could discern the figures of several men, who seemed to be playing a game of cards, and she heard their rough voices. All the windows were tightly closed in spite of the heat.

Presently she heard a step behind her, and turning, saw the young woman with the frizzled hair, whom she had noticed standing by the window when she came up.

"I'm Mrs. Jenks," she said slowly, eyeing the girl in the same intent way that the men had done.

"I've come here to meet Mr. Sorel, my father," Agnes explained. "He said that he would be here to meet me; we are going to Alicia. May I wait for him here, he must have missed his train?"

The woman eyed her still in silence. She held a piece of crochet-work in her hands, and made several stitches in it before she answered; then she said, exactly in the same tone, "Sorel came here yesterday, but he'd a bad chill on him, and he's very ill to-day."

"Oh, where is he? Is he in this house?" said the girl. It gave her a moment of unspeakable relief to think that her father, ill or well, should be there at all.

"He's real bad, I can tell you; but you can see for yourself!" said the woman. She pushed open a door beside them. "Walk in there," she said.

Agnes entered a passage, which, in contrast to the glare outside, seemed absolutely dark. She fumbled along after her guide, and they descended two or three wooden steps into a sort of square entry.

"I'll see if he's asleep still," said Mrs. Jenks, and disappeared through another door.

She came back in a minute. "He's awake now," she said; "you can go in." She nodded towards the room behind her, holding the door open with one foot meanwhile, and making a few more stitches in her crochet.

Agnes entered in silence. There was more light here, and the room was not quite so hot. The walls appeared to be only made of screens of boards covered with coarse paper, flaming with great gay flowers. There were two broken chairs, and a low iron bedstead covered with dingy sheets.

Austin Sorel lay on it, propped with some dirty pillows. His face was livid and sunken, so that the dry lips were drawn backwards over the teeth. His hair lay in damp matted locks, and drops of sweat trickled down his forehead. He held a coarse handkerchief in one hand, and feebly tried to wipe his face with it,

Again, in a moment, a rush of pity, a sudden uprising of her untried affection, filled the girl's heart.

She forgot her toilsome journey, and all her fears; she was only thankful that she might be with him now. She dropped on her knees beside the bed, and laid her hands on his, which felt damp and horrible.

"Oh, father! Why did you not tell me that you were so ill? I would have come long ago!"

He tried to speak, but the dry lips failed to enunciate a word; tried to smile, and then faintly returned the pressure of her hand. "Good girl!" he whispered at last.

Agnes got up and looked about her. Her fatigue had vanished for the moment, and she thought of nothing but how she could help him now. Going to the ricketty window that looked into the back yard, she opened it with some difficulty; then propped it up with the leg of one of the broken chairs, and set the door open, so that a faint current of air began to move through the room. She found a drop of water in a jug, and a small tin basin, and with the water and some Eau de Cologne from her dressing-bag she washed his face and hands, and then spread a clean handkerchief on the pillow. Austin sank back with a sigh of relief, and closed his eyes again. Agnes sat and fanned him for a little, until he breathed more easily and seemed to have fallen asleep.

She watched him for a few minutes longer to make sure that he was sleeping. Then she got up and went in search of Mrs. Jenks.

"I must find some one to sit with him for a little, whilst I have some food," she thought; "or else I shall be ill, and can do nothing."

The loose boards creaked even under her careful tread, as she made her way out of the room into the dark entry beyond. The door leading out of the house was open, but the back yard was empty.

She thought that she heard the sound of women's voices from another door, and, hoping that it led on to the

verandah, opened it, only to find herself in another, larger room. It appeared to be a sort of parlour. The same board walls were covered with the same coarse flaring paper; but there was a carpet on the floor, and a table in the middle of the room.

Entering, Agnes encountered a blast of heat that might have been from the door of a furnace. She stood still for a moment, wondering if it was possible to go in.

Then she saw that there were three women in the room. The window that looked to the front was shut. The sun beat in, unhindered by any curtain or blind. The outer door, too, was shut, and a stove, almost red hot, was roaring away in full blast at the end of the room. On either side of the stove, in rocking-chairs, sat two young women; a third rather older stood by the window. One of them (dressed in crimson merino, trimmed with plush) held a young baby on her knee. The child was wrapped in thick shawls, its tiny face streaming with perspiration, as the mother, apparently quite cool and comfortable, rocked herself back and forwards by the stove. All were totally unemployed, and were talking with a kind of listless mystery.

There seemed no reason for anything about this place, thought Agnes; yet a furtive idleness that might have concealed a great deal hung over it all. She had for the moment a sensation of moving through some purposeless nightmare.

Standing in the doorway, she addressed the women. "Please," she said, "I am quite a stranger, and I don't know my way about this house. I want to find the landlady—Mrs. Jenks, isn't it?"

They all stared, first at each other, then at her.

"Yes, Mrs. Jenks," said the woman by the window.

"My father is very ill," Agnes went on. "I have left him in the room behind there. I must go and have some food, for I have had a long journey, and I want to get the people of the house to send for a doctor."

"There ain't no doctor ye can get here," said the woman placidly.

"Well, I want some one to sit beside him for half an hour while I am away." She suddenly appealed to them all. "Won't one of you be kind enough to do so?"

There was a long dead silence. They all looked at each other, and no one spoke. Then the woman in the red dress, who had a kind enough face, said slowly:

"Wa-al"—she looked round at the others—"I don't mind, for a bit—till you get something to eat." She lifted the moist baby, and held it out to her companion. "Jest take him, Carrie." Then she patted her hair, which was arranged in elaborate rolls on the top of her head, brushed some crumbs from the skirt of her dress, and rising, said to Agnes, "Is he in there? What is it? A bad chill'll kill you in a day or two here."

CHAPTER XLVI

"**T**HERE ain't no doctor here," Mrs. Jenks repeated.
"But can't I send a telegram?" said Agnes.

"Ye might. As like as not he wouldn't be here for two days, and he" (looking at Austin) "would be dead by then, or better, so ye needn't trouble him."

She walked slowly but decidedly away, and Agnes sat down again to watch by the bedside. She had given her father some cooling drink that Mrs. Jenks had recommended, and after taking it he fell asleep. When he wakened he seemed rather better, and was able to speak again.

"Nancy," he said, holding her hand, looking at her as if he could not take his eyes from her face, "you must try to get me back to the plantation. This is no place for you. You can't stay here. If you can get a waggon we can drive."

"But you can't stand that. You're too ill."

"Better than this," he said faintly. "There's no use waiting. There is no saying what may happen here. It's not a good place for a sick man. You must leave as soon as possible. It won't do me any harm. I shall be better at home."

He smiled at the last word, but the mere sound of it made the girl feel less forlorn. That they were within measurable distance of any place that could be so called reassured her a little.

She promised that she would do as he wished, and went off again in search of some one who could procure a waggon.

Mrs. Jenks was apparently useless to appeal to for anything.

"You'd maybe better speak to some of the men in there," the young woman in the red dress told Agnes, indicating the bar-room.

Agnes had heard and read, of course, often, of the true chivalry that underlay the rough exterior of such men as these, but she was none the less afraid of venturing on it. There had been little sign of anything of the kind as yet.

She stood on the verandah, looking about her and wondering what she ought to do. No one in this curious place seemed inclined to speak. The women were strangely silent. If she did ask any question, they always replied that they knew nothing about it, and looked the other way. Two of them had by this time disappeared, while her friend in the red merino had retired to nurse the baby by the stove.

The heat out of doors was increasing as the day approached to noon. Agnes saw no sign of life about the houses yet. The only things stirring were the great black pigs, the negro porter, and the little old mule that tottered with the car behind it along the track, only this time it was going in the opposite direction. She hoped that when the next train came the conductor might assist her, and sat down on the verandah to await its arrival. After a while she saw two men mounted on strange, high-peaked Mexican saddles come riding up to the house.

One was a young man with very light hair and a sun-burnt face; his companion was a good deal older. Both wore queer gloves with long, embroidered gauntlets, and they walked with a curious swagger as they swung off the high saddles and came up the wooden steps. They spoke a word to the negro, and then disappeared within.

Presently Agnes saw the man who had been having his boots polished when she arrived in the morning, sitting by

the window next to her. He was playing cards, and had a tumbler of some dark liquor on the table at his elbow. His hat was pushed on the back of his head, and his long, pale face wore an expression at once stupified and excited.

She had waited for a few minutes, but heard no sound of a train, so at last she went to the door of the room and looked in.

At first she did not know who to speak to, but then addressed herself to the bull-necked man she had seen in the morning, who now stood near the doorway, smoking.

"I want to know," she began—at the sound of her voice they all stopped talking and stared at her in silence—"if I can get a covered waggon with two horses," she went on, "to drive my father to the plantation at Alicia. He is very ill."

"There's no waggon," said the man slowly.

Some one in the background made a remark in a low tone, at which several of the men laughed aloud. Agnes heard a clicking noise, and they turned to their game again. The others smoked, and spat, and stared. Some had their feet on the tables, others sprawled about on chairs. They all had their hats on, and no one had moved as she entered the room. Then an evil-looking man near the door tilted his chair, and staring in her face, said something to her. The dialect was strange, and she did not quite catch the words; only the tone was significant, and a sudden deadly terror came over the girl as she heard. She grasped the handle of the door, feeling her face get suddenly "goose skin," and her knees begin to shake.

Taking a step forward into the room, she raised her voice a little. "My father is very ill. I wish for a waggon and a driver at once," she said again, unconsciously using a tone that made the men look up. Several of them moved their chairs, as if they unwillingly acknowledged the presence of a superior. One took off his battered hat and laid it on the table beside him; another half rose from his seat with an awkward gesture; the bull-

necked man straightened himself, and threw away the end of his cigar.

At the far end of the room, sitting at a small table, Agnes saw the two men who had ridden up to the house half an hour before. The younger man was sitting with his back to her, but as she spoke wheeled round in his chair, looked at her for a moment, and then rose slowly to his feet, holding his hat in his hand.

"If I can be of any use to the lady——" he began.

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed his companion, and a shout of laughter followed. Agnes heard something about "Jacky" and "the girl."

She did not listen, but stood still by the door, and the young man advanced towards her up the crowded room. He walked with a curious mincing step, in his riding breeches and long boots, ornamented with huge Mexican spurs. He was grasping a riding-whip in one hand. The hand lifted for a moment as he passed the group of men by the door.

"Can I be of any service to you, madam?" he said as he came up.

He spoke like an Englishman, but his manner was a mixture of hesitation and impudence, and he stared hard in her face as he spoke.

"Hello, Jacky! Play fair," some one called out, as the young man stepped into the passage along with Agnes.

"Jacky" turned and pulled the door shut with a bang.

"Come in here, and tell me what you want," he said, opening the door of the parlour. It was still as hot as an oven—empty now, for the young woman and the baby had disappeared.

"Jacky" followed Agnes into the room, still stepping gingerly along, trying to keep his absurd spurs from catching on the ragged carpet.

"If you can tell me what you want, I'll see if I can get the waggon," he went on.

He leant one hand on the table, holding the other against his hip, still grasping the riding-whip in his right hand, and looked at her in the same strange way.

She saw then how young he was—his face very fair, with small features. The eyes were so dilated that they seemed to be all pupil, making them look almost black. She liked neither his looks nor his manner, but he spoke like an Englishman, and he had been the only person to show any attention to her request.

"You are very kind," she said, still trembling. "You will know better than I can what I want. I have only just arrived in this country, and I don't know the roads or the distances or anything."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I want to go to a plantation about nine miles from Alicia."

"Murrel's?"

"Yes, that's the name, I think."

"That's twenty miles from here. Is your father very sick?"

"Yes, he is; but he is anxious to get back, and he says he cannot stay here."

"You've come from England, I think?" he said.

"Oh, yes. You are an Englishman," cried Agnes, forgetting her dislike in the joy of discovering a fellow countryman.

He laughed—blushed, she thought—and answered shortly, "Once was."

Then he came a step nearer to her, and before she knew what he was going to do, took up her hand and kissed it.

Agnes started back with an expression of disgust and terror that made him laugh again. He bent closer to her. She saw his eyes glitter, and suddenly stood still before him, without retreating another step. In the distance she heard a door open, and the sound of loud voices and heavy feet.

"I am all alone here," she said, looking up in his face

as she spoke. "If you are a gentleman *at all*, please try to help me."

"What is a gentleman *at all*? I didn't know there were degrees about it."

"Don't you know what it means?" she asked.

"I used to know," he answered; then added, "I'll try to remember now. Will you take me to see your father? He mayn't be fit to be moved, you know. It's past one o'clock already. You can't take a sick man over twenty miles of the worst roads in the country before dark, and if you try you'll find yourself spending the night by the roadside."

"What can I do then?"

"Stay here. Keep in the room with him." He looked at her meaningly. "And don't go trying to get Mrs. Jenks to help you. You've been with sick people before?"

"Oh, yes, but he is very ill."

"What's the matter? A bullet wound?"

"Oh, no!" The girl started, looking into the hard bright eyes. "He's been ill for a long time, and he got a chill coming here to meet me."

The man nodded. "Let's have a look at him," he said.

Agnes led him into her father's room. As they entered Austin opened his eyes. When he saw who was with the girl he made an effort to rise on his elbow, but sank back again with a groan.

"Feeling pretty bad, sir?" said the young man, advancing to the bed. He knelt down on one knee, with a great jangle of spurs, and with an adroit movement slipped his arm under Austin and turned him into an easier position. "See here," he went on, speaking with his mouth close to his ear, "you're a very sick man indeed, you know; and if you start off at this hour of the day you'll never reach Murrel's before night, not if you had ten horses. If the young lady will look after you to-night, I'll see about a waggon first thing to-morrow morning."

Agnes heard her father mutter something about, "Not a place for her."

"Well, I grant you it's not quite a ladies' boarding-school; but if she stays in here with you, I'll speak to Jenks, and she'll be all right."

Agnes came and bent over the bed. "I will stay with you, father, and I'm sure that it will be all right. There is a woman there—the one who came and sat with you for a while. She was quite kind. She will get me anything I want."

The young man said something she did not hear. Her father nodded faintly, and made a motion with his right hand. Jacky stooped again, and drew out a little revolver from under the pillow.

"Can you use it?" he asked, holding it to Agnes.

"No, no; I don't know anything about it. I'd be afraid to touch it," she said, remembering suddenly how once Terence had proposed to teach Elma and her to shoot straight, and had been indignant at their refusal.

"You'd be wise to learn, if you are going to live down here," said Jacky. He examined the revolver and laid it down again, not under the pillow this time, but close to the sick man's hand.

"Well," he said, "I'll look in again later, and see how he's getting on. I'll see about a waggon. Is that all I can do for you?"

He spoke with difficulty, frequently hesitating as if to choose a suitable word, then he went out, and when Agnes heard the torrent of language he used to some one whom he met at the door, she understood his careful speech.

"Do you know that man, father?" she asked.

Austin nodded.

"Who is he?"

She heard the words "Englishman . . . bad lot," and could make out no more, for another attack of pain had come on, and he was nearly unconscious again.

In the late afternoon the red merino woman came to

the door, entering without knock or apology of any kind. Her elaborate coiffure was by this time rather touzled, and she smelt strongly of brandy, but Agnes was glad to see her.

"You want some food, I guess," she drawled. "There's some crackers and coffee in the parlour, if you go right in now. He's real bad," she said, standing and looking down at Austin.

Agnes thanked her, and left her to sit with the sick man, while she returned to the parlour, where she found a meal still on the table. There were dirty plates and cups about, as if two or three people had been eating, although the room was mysteriously empty.

She forced herself to eat something, and to drink a cup of cold coffee, and then went into a dirty, empty bedroom, that the woman had shown her before, where she found a little water and washed her face and hands. When she returned, somewhat refreshed, to her father, Red Merino was standing calmly searching the pockets of his coat, which hung by the window. She did not appear at all disconcerted by the sight of Agnes; only, laying down some letters she had been looking at, she remarked, "There ain't much of value here; but if you know where his money is, you'd better put it on yourself." Then, nodding to Agnes, she flung the coat back again over the chair and moved to the door.

"Goin' to-morrow, are ye?" she said, standing still.

"Yes, if we can. A man who knows my father—they call him 'Jacky' here—is going to get a waggon for me."

"When? To-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow morning, he said."

The woman sniggered. "You lay your life he won't be up to much to-morrow morning."

"Why not?" Agnes asked, gazing at her.

"What do you suppose he's down here for? To read the Bible?" said the woman, who was swinging the door to and fro with her foot.

"What has he come for?" Agnes asked.

"Why, to spend his money, of course. To get drunk, an' all that." She nodded to Agnes again. "You'll git no waggon to-morrow morning if he's to find it for you. Waal, good-night."

Agnes sat still by the bedside after she had gone. The light was getting very dim now, and she wondered how long the one candle in the room would burn. Whilst her father lay quiet, she could sit beside him in the darkness, she thought, and not waste the candle; but as the night came on the noises in the house mysteriously increased. People seemed to come and go. She heard the sound of horses' hoofs in the yard. Yells of laughter sounded now and then from the front of the house. Once a heavy, stumbling step came close at hand, and the door behind her opened. Agnes started up, but the intruder, whoever it was, had shut the door again, and she heard the steps retreating.

Then her father began to moan and toss about, and she lit the precious candle. He was far too heavy for her to lift, so she could do very little to ease his suffering, beyond attending to his wants, giving him something to drink, and soothing him as well as she could. She got out a tiny kettle from her travelling-bag, and boiled some water, but then she was at an end of her resources.

At last some one knocked at the door. Agnes was afraid to say, "Come in." She got up softly, taking the little revolver from the pillow and holding it in her right hand; then moved to the door and opened it.

She saw Jacky on the threshold. He laughed when he caught sight of the revolver.

"You're holding that upside down, you know," he said. "Better leave it alone altogether. How's your father now?"

Agnes remembered what Red Merino had said, and looked at him, shrinking away as he came nearer.

But as the man came into the room her father suddenly

raised himself, with a groan of intense pain, and they both hurried towards him.

"Have you any brandy? Give it to me here, quick," said Jacky.

Agnes poured out some hastily, and he supported the sick man on his arm, tilting the cup against his teeth, until he got him to swallow a little of the brandy.

"There, now; you look after him as well as you can, and I'll see if I can get some hot water. You've only a teacupful in that thing."

He motioned to her to support her father as he had done, and then left the room.

Agnes could scarcely breathe whilst he was away. She thought her father would die in her arms as she sat there.

She felt as if half an hour had passed, although it was in reality only a few minutes, until the young man returned. He brought some hot water and a bottle of laudanum with him, and directed her how to apply it.

The acute pain passed off after a while, and Austin lay still, breathing more easily. Agnes sat on the edge of the bed, the young man on one of the broken chairs, watching in silence. At last he rose quietly.

"Oh, don't go away," said Agnes desperately, but speaking in a whisper, lest she should rouse her father. She went on hurriedly, "You will go and get drunk, I know—that woman told me why you came here—and my father is dying. Can't you wait till we have gone?"

The hard, unflickering, dilated eyes fixed upon her grew brighter with anger for a moment. He hesitated, then his face relaxed. He laughed softly, and swore under his breath, then, turning with a little clink of spurs and creaking of leather boots, sat down again by the bed.

Agnes was as white as a sheet now—a great deal whiter than the grimy sheets on which the sick man lay. She had been sitting on the edge of the bed until she was stiff with fatigue, afraid to move in case she awakened him.

"He's sound asleep now. You lean back there ; you'll be more comfortable so," said Jacky, rising. He lifted a pillow, and shoved it behind her shoulders. "Lean back and rest. He's all right just now."

The girl leant her head back, and before she was aware an overpowering weariness had stolen across her. She could not even lift her hand to push in the hairpins that were sticking into her head. Her eyelids seemed to close with a leaden weight. She swam off into unconsciousness without another movement, the moment that her head touched the pillow.

CHAPTER XLVII

IT was such a deep sleep. Agnes had forgotten everything in the world when she wakened with a start, cramped by her uncomfortable position, and scarcely knowing where she was. The candle was just guttering in the socket, the quick morning beginning to brighten in the sky. She raised herself and looked about her.

The young man still sat opposite, his bright, bead-like eyes fixed upon Austin's face. As Agnes stirred he looked up.

"He's better—been asleep all this time." He yawned and looked at his watch. "Now, if you are going to move him, we'd better be going soon. I'll go and see about the waggon, and then come back and help you. If you can, get him into some of his clothes, and we'll wrap him in a blanket. We can take him as easy as possible."

"Are you coming?" said Agnes, hesitating.

He stood up, stretching his arms above his head, and yawning. "Yes, I'll come and see you safe there."

"But," Agnes began. A sudden sparkle came into her black eyes.

"Oh, I can get drunk to-morrow, on my way back," he said, laughing.

Agnes was half frightened, half amused. She asked him to sit with her father a little longer, and went off to make what toilette she could in the bedroom that she had been in before. There was a scrap of looking-glass there, and

surveying herself in it, she wondered how she could have spoken to or endured with calmness the gaze even of this nameless stranger, looking as she did.

For (in spite of the novelists) the effects of a long, hot journey, a day of anxiety, and an almost sleepless night, had made her very sad to look upon. The slips of black hair hung limp about her pale, unwashed face; her eyes were dim under the swollen lids; her lips were blue; she looked twenty years older than she had done the week before.

However, when she had tidied herself up a little she felt less deplorable, and returned to find her father awake again. He was very weak, but not suffering so much pain.

"All right; it's better to go. You can't stay here, Nancy," he said, when she told him that he was going to be moved.

An hour later they carried him to the front of the house, where a covered waggon drawn by two mules was waiting. Mrs. Jenks and the negro porter were the only people visible at that hour. The sum the woman named, when asked for her bill, astonished the girl; but she was thankful to leave the place, and paid it without a word.

"And my blankets? How much for them?" said Mrs. Jenks.

As she looked at her Agnes vaguely wondered if she had worn those paste combs all night, for they were still winking in her frowsy hair, even in the early dawn.

"Your blankets will be returned in the waggon," said Jacky, who had come up in time to hear this. "Get in; never mind her," he said, hoisting Agnes up as he spoke. He swung himself into his high saddle and called to the black boy to start the mules.

As they rumbled off Agnes looked back on Mrs. Jenks, standing talking to the tall, fat negro. She observed, with a sudden horror, that this morning *he* wore bright blue

socks and a pair of new boots, like those of the man that she had seen on the verandah the day before.

The waggon lumbered on, sticking fast every now and then in the deep, sandy roads, splashing through the shallow pools, jolting over wooden bridges. The wooden houses disappeared, and the straggling wooden causeway came to an end. An emaciated cow was standing chewing splinters off the last post as they drove out of the village.

The road entered a wood, and then they crossed a wooden bridge, and got in amongst the cypress swamps, then out once more to the long fields, with a grey log cabin here and there.

The sun had risen furiously hot, and Agnes soon lost all her points of geography. They might have been going through a landscape in the moon, for all she knew.

Her father had fallen asleep. The fresh air seemed to have done him good, and although he moaned when the waggon jolted badly, his breathing was quieter.

Now and then Jacky would ride up to give some direction to the driver, or say a word or two to the girl, but most of the time he rode alongside in silence.

Agnes looked out at the sandy, lonesome roads, at the deep forests and the swamps, at the cotton-fields and cabins, then at the man riding beside her. She thought of England and home; of the quiet little parsonage, and her Uncle Timothy with his spectacles on, reading the *Spectator*; of the order and safety of life in her native country; even, with longing, of Miss Briggs, bending above her beadwork amongst the malformed walnut furniture of the hot little sitting-room.

Then she looked at her father, lying breathing painfully with the stamp of mortal illness on his face.

She had read so often of young women who came to outlandish parts of the earth, far worse than this, and established an instant camaraderie with outlaws, and the roughest of the rough men amongst whom they found themselves—very amusing reading, but now she was

painfully aware that whatever the heroines could do, she had no talent for that sort of thing. She was simply afraid of them all—afraid even of the young man who had assisted her, as she would have been of a tiger that had purred at her kindly. There was nothing in her nature to meet the circumstances; she was a futile creature, who could only hold a revolver upside down, and felt no confidence in her own power to influence men of that sort, whilst negroes were a problem she had never even considered as yet. Those she had spoken to had been more gentle and polite than the white people, and she was less afraid of them. . . . Self-contempt is an enervating exercise, and after she had indulged for a while in these thoughts the girl felt miserably depressed. Perhaps, after all, she would have been wiser to stay at home; she could do her father very little good when she was such an inefficient coward. She sat gazing out of the waggon and wishing herself at home again.

They stopped after an hour or two, to rest the mules and have some food, then Agnes got out of the waggon and sat down on the low rail of a bridge, taking off her hat to let the air cool her face.

The young man dismounted and came beside her. "Feeling strange?" he asked.

"Very," said Agnes. "Do you think we can get my father home all right?"

He glanced into the waggon. "Yes, I think so. We'll be there by four o'clock. Are you tired? Shall we not wait a little longer?"

"It's cooler in the woods," said Agnes.

She looked round about her. Everywhere she could see the gigantic trees, some of them draped with trailing vines, some of them blasted as if by fire. The turf in the clearings was green as emerald, and low bushes covered with white blossom stood here and there.

"I'd like to have some of those flowers," she said, looking at them.

Jacky walked after her as she stepped into the wood. He pulled at the white branches, cracking them off one by one till he had a great handful. Their footsteps made no noise on the velvet turf.

Suddenly Agnes stood still. "Oh, look!" she called softly, pointing in front of them.

There, in a green recess, on turf like deep emerald velvet, with just a shaft of sunlight striking down through the gigantic trees, she saw five red birds—like flames, like jewels, too beautiful to be real or to touch the earth it seemed, each one a living flame from head to tail—flittering about in the still green recess.

"Oh, look at those birds!" she exclaimed. "They must have lost their way and flown down out of heaven!"

"Cardinal birds," said Jacky. "Have you never seen them before?"

"Never. Oh, these are cardinal birds!" said Agnes.

She took the handful of white blossoms from him, and they walked back to the waggon in silence. But the sound of their voices had scared the red birds; they flew up and away, uttering low, musical cries like the dialogue of happy souls. They flamed for an instant through the dark foliage, and were gone.

A wave of remembrance came over the girl. She seemed again to be sitting in a hot little room, with a crowd of women in bonnets, drinking tea and talking about slugs.

"I once heard a horrid story about a cardinal bird," she said to Jacky. "When I was in England an old lady told me that some one she knew had one sent home to her by a nephew. She kept it in a cage—a thing like *that*!—and she fed it on black-beetles till it developed a raging thirst, and went on drinking water all day long till it died!" Her face clouded; she bent over the blossoms to hide it.

"Well," said Jacky, "I was going to suggest having a

shot at one, but if you feel like that I'd better not." He looked a little confused by her emotion.

Agnes climbed into the waggon again, and they rumbled off along the sandy road. She lifted her father's head on to her lap, making him more comfortable, and he seemed still asleep. They were nearing the end of their journey at last. She sat looking out, and scarcely saw the road they passed along.

"Things like that can happen in this miserable world to a beautiful red bird that might have sung in heaven," she thought. "*And what may not happen to me? What may not happen to me?*"

An hour later, as the sun was beginning to decline, they rumbled again over a long wooden bridge, and reached a harder, smoother road, where the mules quickened their pace.

The sick man was groaning now, for the pain was coming on again, and Agnes felt how every jolt hurt him as they bumped along the road.

"We're near the house now!" said Jacky, riding up.

Agnes looked out and saw a white-painted wooden house, standing in a small clearing.

As they stopped at the door a man came up from the sheds behind, and a heavy-faced woman, who wore a tidy cotton gown, came out to meet them.

"I told him he wasn't fit to go, but he was set on meeting you himself," she said, as she assisted them to lift Austin out of the waggon.

The two men carried him into the house.

"I'm Mrs. Baker," said the woman, looking at Agnes kindly. "You'd like a cup of coffee, I dare say?"

"Oh, thank you. I'd like to see that my father is all right first," said Agnes.

She was surprised at the neatness of the room, when she followed Mrs. Baker into the house. She understood now how her father had called it "home." It was all so clean; there was a table with a striped cloth by the

window—a photograph of old Mrs. Sorel stood on it, some books and writing things, and a picture of Agnes herself. She glanced around the room, and then Mrs. Baker came and helped her to get the sick man put to bed. He lay back exhausted, the yellow face showing its ugly colour against the white pillows.

After a few minutes Agnes went to the door, and found "Tacky" with a long tumbler in his hand, standing talking to Baker.

"I'll be off then," he said, as she came out. "Can I send a telegram for you, or anything, when I get back to Alicia?"

"Oh, are you going straight back all that way!"

"Yes; it won't hurt me. I can ride much faster than we came. I'll rest my horse at Alicia." He stood looking at her. "Have you friends anywhere in America?" he asked.

"Yes, in Washington," said Agnes.

"H'm; I'd let them know that your father is very ill. Well, good-bye, then, if there's nothing more that I can do?"

Agnes held out her hand to him. "Good-bye; thank you very much," she said.

He took her hand for an instant, looked at her again, then jumped upon his horse and lifted his hat to her as he rode away.

She stood on the verandah looking after him. He was a mere incident, a "ship that passed" in this new country; yet she was sorry to see him go.

Mrs. Baker had promised to sit up with Austin and let Agnes have a quiet night. As she lay down in the clean little room that had been prepared for her, she thought again of the young man—whose name she never even knew. "He will have reached Alicia by this time," she thought.

She remembered a book that used to be a great favourite with them all at school. Maria Briggs had first introduced it to the other girls. It told of the marvellous effects of

a pure young girl's gentle words and smile upon the inhabitants of a mining camp. Agnes could not quite remember how the pure young girl had got there, or what happened afterwards; but she knew that many a hard heart had melted under her rebuke.

"I'm so *useless*," she thought. "I couldn't say anything to him. The favour was on his side; it was he that was kind to me. I hope he won't get *very* drunk!"

CHAPTER XLVIII

“**A** YEAR more, Nancy ! If I could only have another year even !” said Austin.

He was lying with his head sunk in the pillows, his arms stretched out, the restless fingers twitching all the time. It was late at night—a hot night when the open doors and windows let in no air. Agnes could see on the far horizon the constant flitting of the sheet-lightning, and hear the frogs sing in the swamps with a high sing-song, almost like the sound of some monotonous musical instrument.

“I wish that you could, father,” she said. “I wish we could have had years together ; perhaps it might have made up a little to you.”

He shook his head, and brushed her hand impatiently away as she was about to arrange his pillow. “Leave me alone, please. Oh, I don’t want to be cross, child, but I’m sick of all this !”

Agnes went on fanning him gently, and laid her hand on his for an instant, looking at him with a smile.

“God knows I’ve nothing to leave in the world, except you,” he went on. “And I’m nothing to you, after all ; but I want to stay—to *squeeze* something out of life yet. Oh, it was fine, Nancy, when I first came here, to ride into the forest as far as I could go, to feel the sun, and smell the earth in the morning. I’ve felt I could root in it like the hogs ; it was so good !” He smiled, a pitiful

smile with his dry lips, that Agnes could not bear to see. "I seemed almost to catch it then," he went on, turning his face away from her.

"What, father?" asked the girl.

"Just *living*; something, something—I don't know what. My mind's so confused now. What was I saying? What will become of you, now, Nancy?"

"Oh, I shall be all right, father."

He closed his eyes and lay still for a few minutes, and Agnes hoped he was asleep; but when she next looked up, his eyes were fixed upon her face. She did not speak, till he said suddenly:

"So you couldn't marry Mark Bassett?"

"No, father, I couldn't!" said Agnes; her voice quivered.

He regarded her with the same fixed look. "*Your—mother—loved—me,*" he said slowly, with a pause between each word.

His eyes closed again, and he fell off into an uneasy sleep. Mrs. Baker came in to urge the girl to go to bed, saying that she would sit up with him till morning. She was very sensible and kind, and after her long, anxious journey, strange as all her surroundings still were, Agnes had felt the sense of rest and safety delicious. Her father was very ill, but she was able to give him proper attention, and the people were friendly and obliging. She had a curious feeling every morning of waking *into* a dream instead of out of it—as if all the scenery and the strange people around her were a vision that might dissolve at any moment.

It gave her quite a start, the first day that she received a bundle of letters. Somehow she had never thought of letters reaching her in this place at all. There was a note from Margaret Woods, begging her to tell them how she had got on, and how her father was.

"I will leave Terence to add a postscript," she said at the end.

The postscript was brief. "*If I don't hear next week how you are, I shall come and see.*"

Agnes clutched the letter tight. She felt as if her heart began to sing for a moment; but only for a moment, for immediately the old feeling rose up again, of pride and resentment. "I won't have him come and make his mother miserable. She was only kind for his sake!" and she sat down and replied to Margaret's letter.

She told of her safe arrival, that her father was very ill, but that she was now in a comfortable house, and the people were very kind. "She can't think I want him to come!" she thought, as she closed the letter.

Next day was Sunday. Her father was worse, and Agnes sat with him all the time. He asked what day of the week it was, and when she told him, said, "No priests here!"

After a while he touched her hand. "Read to me, Nancy!"

Agnes went to her room to find a book. She stood by the open door, as she came back, looking out into the dazzling sunshine. The wall of the virgin forest shut in the clearing on every side but one; far away, over there in the distance somewhere, was the friend of her heart.

"I couldn't let him come," she thought, standing leaning against the pillars of the verandah, and watching the little black hogs that were rooting about, hunting for acorns under the oak-trees that grew about the clearing. *But how I wish that he would!*"

Then again, as so often before, she pushed the thought of personal happiness away from her, saying to herself, "It doesn't matter. I can just keep it in my heart!"

A great jet-black butterfly fluttered past her, and settled on the pink blossom of the little tree that grew by the verandah. Then came a huge one with eyes like peacocks' feathers on his wings. Agnes watched it all. She was beginning to find so many beauties in this new place. Why

could that not content her ? Was the beauty of the world not enough ?

She returned to her father's room and sat down to read to him, but the book sounded so unreal and tedious, that she was ashamed to go on with it.

" Shall I go on, father ; it's very stupid ? "

" Yes ; I'm tired of that now. Read me the Bible—that's real, anyway."

She got a Bible, and handed it to him ; he turned the pages with difficulty, and then pushed the book towards her, pointing with his finger to the place where he wanted her to read. Agnes began in a low, steady voice.

" Yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that they go to the dead. . . . The living know that they shall die . . . the dead know not any thing, neither have they any more a reward ; for the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, and their hatred " (she heard him mutter to himself " their hatred ! "), " and their envy, is now perished ; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun. . . . "

" Go on ! " he said faintly ; and Agnes read on :

" For man also knoweth not his time : as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds that are caught in the snare ; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them. . . . "

Agnes read on mechanically ; her father lay with closed eyes, quite still now.

" There was a little city, and few men within it ; and there came a great king against it, and besieged it. . . . " She stopped reading, and sat gazing out through the open window ; no sound came in on the hot air, the whole landscape out of doors was flooded with golden light. Her thoughts had wandered from the original meaning of what she read, and she repeated it over to herself.

" '*There was a little city . . . and there came a great king against it. . . .*' Why should Love be so strong, be able

to close the heart to everything, so that it starves alone like a beleaguered town ! ”

Her father stirred and opened his eyes again. She bent over him, and he caught at her hand, and tried to raise himself for a moment. “ Agnes ! Agnes ! ” he called hoarsely, looking not at the girl but beyond her, as if he saw some one there.

Then he fell heavily backwards, and before she could call for assistance she saw that he was dead.

CHAPTER XLIX

TWO days later Agnes sat alone on the verandah, about sunset. She had not even a black frock to put on, but wore her white linen gown as she had done before. There were "no priests," as her father had said—no services—no funeral, like an English funeral. She had stopped to look at the poor bits of wood that marked the graves amongst which his had been made, and thought to herself that the nameless graves were the best.

As she drove back again in the rough little waggon, a sudden overpowering sense of life struck her as it had never done before. The heat of the sun, the scents of the forest, the teeming growth all around, seemed to be calling her to come and live too—to turn away from the dead and leave them, and go on with her own life.

"Oh, it is like what one imagines the world to be, if one tries to think of it before one was born into it oneself, or after one is dead—going on and on—without oneself," she thought, looking round on the country that was still so strange to her.

The people in the house had been very kind, and done all they could to help her, but she knew that in a week or two she must leave them, and there her imagination paused. Should she return to England? Somehow the remembrance of the parsonage at Little Widger, of her Uncle Timothy and the minute interest of life there, of Mark Bassett as she had seen him last, standing in the grey, soaking mist, seemed to have become very dim and far away.

Could she return to Miss Briggs and her beadwork ? To all the life that was now behind her ? Was it ever wise to go back instead of trying to go forward ? Was there ever any one so alone as she was, she wondered, as she sat there in the sun.

She had been watching listlessly the approach of a black boy who was riding on an old mule, and came slowly up the road from Alicia. He stopped at the house, hitched the mule to the gatepost, and advanced dusty and grinning, holding a bundle of letters in his hand.

"Are those for me ?" inquired the girl. She was again half surprised that letters should reach her at all, and took them from him, going back to her seat in the shade before she even looked to see what they were.

There were two letters from England, one from her Cousin Hannah, the other from the faithful Maria Briggs ; she would read them at leisure, she thought. England was so far away ! Then there was one from her Aunt Clare—how well she knew the sprawling handwriting ! The sense of impending trouble so familiar to her at the sight of it made her tear it open at once.

But she had not read more than half a page before she saw that this time, at least, the calamity was not very great.

After a few preliminary remarks on the folly of Agnes having gone out to her father at all, "You will be surprised to hear," wrote Clare, "that I am about to take a serious step in life. Tired of my ignominious position amongst people who all regard me with jealousy, I have decided to unite myself to an Armenian gentleman of high family, who has been devoted to me ever since we met last year in Vienna.

"The Prince (on his mother's side he is closely connected with the Royal Family of Turkey) has travelled widely, and has much property, including a lovely villa on the shores of the Caspian Sea. Brought up as you have been, you will probably be 'shocked' when I mention that, as he has none

of the narrow notions of morality which prevail in our (*so-called*) monogamous society, his household consists at present of two Circassian ladies. This, however, will in no way inconvenience me, as the eldest (his first love !) is now totally blind ; whilst the younger—a mere nobody—occupies more the position of the biblical concubine : so that I shall have undisputed sway in the household, where, owing to the Prince's descent, I shall be practically a Princess.

" His presents are numerous and very handsome ; but of course, a suitable trousseau means a considerable outlay of ready money. *You* will have needed little or nothing, going out to the backwoods as you have done ; and Austin, I suppose, is making money : so I shall be glad if your remembrance takes the form of a cheque.

" P.S. We may very probably come to New York, as the Prince, who is no mere idler, like so many men of culture, does a little business in precious stones."

Agnes let the letter fall on her knee and laughed aloud. Then she looked at it again and sighed—the same little, hard, suppressed sigh, she had so often heard from her grandmother when Clare was mentioned long ago.

After a minute she stooped down and picked up the other letter, which had fallen to the floor at her feet. As she looked at it her heart beat faster and her eyes grew bright. Then she opened it and read—only a few lines :

" DEAR AGNES,—I haven't heard from you, and this is Monday, so I am coming to see how you are for myself, and to take you back to Washington—if I can. You know you said you would like to live there if you *had* to live in America ! Don't trouble to tell me not to come, as I shall have started long before you get this."

Agnes got up, and went into the house. She sat down, and leant her head on her hands. Every pulse in her body seemed to throb at once. The only words that came to her mind were what she had been reading to her father the day he died :

"*There was a little city . . . and a great king came up against it, and besieged it.*" She lifted her face with a start as Mrs. Baker came into the room. "I have heard that a friend is coming to see me, Mrs. Baker," she said; her eyelids fell, and she blushed a little as she spoke, and Mrs. Baker regarded her curiously. "Can you tell me when he will be here if he comes from Alicia?"

"By the night express? He'll arrive some time in the morning early then."

"Oh, not till to-morrow?"

"Like as not till six in the morning," said Mrs. Baker. "But if he's quick he might be here by four." She looked at Agnes kindly. "There ain't no need for you to sit up. Jake's up by four always, and he can make some coffee for him if he comes."

Agnes smiled at the mention of the eternal coffee, which she thought had been presented to her at every crisis since she arrived in this country.

She sat up very late that night, in spite of Mrs. Baker's assertions that Terence could never arrive before morning.

As the lightning played about the edges of the sky, she wished it were the dawn. The frogs made such a noise that night that she thought she could not have heard the sound of wheels upon the sandy road. Then, all of a sudden, she remembered how ugly her face had been when she caught sight of herself in the glass, after sitting up in the hotel with her father.

"I can't have Terry see me like that!" she thought, and she went to bed at once.

She was roused by Mrs. Baker saying, "Jake says if the gentleman left Alicia off the express he should be here in half an hour now."

Agnes sprang up. She hurried with her dressing. Of course, everything went wrong at once; and even when she had done her hair for the second time, she laid down the hand-mirror with a sigh, saying, "I'm perfectly hideous, but it can't be helped."

The dawn was still grey when she stepped out of doors, and a thrill of cold in the air made her draw her cloak about her more closely.

She crossed the space of open ground in front of the house, and looked along the road, but there was no sign of life as yet upon it. So she strolled along the soft grass, watching the mists rise and curl slowly off the green river.

The edges of the forest appeared—here and there a vivid pale green tree; long arrows of light began to beat down upon the short turf; the shadow of the hawthorn-tree that grew upon the Indian mound in the pasture became more defined; the hogs came snorting out of the wood; the birds began to call to one another; the light broadened in the white sky. A great and radiant day was approaching—"far off His coming shone"; and as each trembling shaft of light came down it shot farther than the last.

Agnes moved on to the edge of the forest—stood looking along the dense, clouded paths. The very smell of the ground, the foliage, the colours, were all strange to her, and still she felt as if she walked in a dream. She gazed at the low green hillock in the pasture, that marked the graves of an unremembered race. How short life was! "And behold, the dead know not any thing; also their love, and their hatred, and their envy is now perished; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun." Yet, as she stood there in the early light, the heart of youth within her saw a happy eternity before it, and laughed in denial of the words.

Then a thousand terrors assailed her. She was so poor in her nature; she had made such mistakes. Her cheeks burned even then as she thought about Mark Bassett. What could ever undo that? And Terence was not an Englishman. What differences might arise between them? Long ago, at Little Widger, he had said to her: "*Forget*

also thine own people, and thy father's house." Could she do it? Would she ever be happy? Did she love him enough? Was there still time to draw back, or was it too late? All her shadowed childhood, the disgrace of her name, her habitual self-distrust and timidity, came rising up like pursuing ghosts to frighten her.

The long black shadows were gradually withdrawing as the background of mossy turf grew golden with the sun. A pair of red birds flew across from the forest, to alight for a moment on a spray of the blossom-laden tree, fluting with a happy chuckle as they darted back into the woods again.

She thought she heard the sound of wheels, and turned to go back to the house. As she drew nearer she saw that a waggon stood by the gate, and Mrs. Baker was pointing out the direction in which she had gone to the man who had alighted from it. For a moment Agnes stood still, with her eyes fixed on the ground. Could she go forward?

Then she looked up again, and her scruples and hesitations melted away like a troop of shadows before the sun.

There was Terence coming across the shining morning grass as she once had seen him in a dream—older, thinner, stained with the dust of his long journey, his bright eyes fixed upon her.

"Did you expect me? Did you get my letter?" he asked.

"Yes; I came to meet you, Terry," said Agnes; and lifting up her face to him, she mistrusted not, neither doubted any more at all.

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